

“Don’t you realize it’s Just Her Disguise?”

Performances of femininity by Kim Gordon, Tori Amos and Gillian Welch



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Preface

Both popular music and femininity is something I deal with everyday, yet it has been quite challenging to write about it. I have been able to do so because of the following people:

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Chapter 1: Introduction

Given its centrality in the manipulation of affect, social formation, and the constitution of identity, music is far too important a phenomenon *not* to talk about, even if the most important questions cannot be definitively settled by means of objective, positivistic methodologies. For music is always a political activity [...].

Susan McClary (2002[1991]:26)

[I]f one considers that gender is acquired, that it is assumed in relation to ideals which are never quite inhabited by anyone, then femininity is an ideal which everyone always and only 'imitates'.

Judith Butler (1997:145).

Popular music performers represent forms of gender address that are experienced on both public and personal levels. Their music is mass-distributed, and their performances can be captured on TV, on the internet or at live concerts; they reach a wide public. At the same time, they inhabit the innermost personal spaces of the listeners - they represent both the ordinary and the "transcendence of the ordinary" (Toynbee: 2000: x). As such, musicians are "*exemplary agents* who make a difference, in the shape of different songs, sounds and styles" (Toynbee: 2000: x). In other words, the sounds that musicians make represent something that is new, that is invented. Constructions of gender and sexuality are of the most crucial of popular music's effects, and often these constructions challenge traditional gender norms (McClary: 2002:53). Musical representations of femininity in the 1990s and early 2000s were marked by a fluidity and variation in available character roles, roles that could be taken on with more or less serious intentions. The question is, in what ways does popular music challenge gender norms, and why does it matter? Female popular music performers were in many ways in the spotlight in the 1990s, as more female artists than ever before were entering the popular music field, within several different genres. These "were take-charge women who told of the pleasures and struggles of living in a patriarchal world" (Savage: 2003:1).

Ann Savage calls the typical female rock artists in the 1990s "take-charge women", strong and independent. Kim Gordon, Tori Amos and Gillian Welch all come across as self-made, creative, competent and outspoken female musicians. They have all been promoted as, and represented themselves as, women who mean something with their music. In this thesis, I ask how these artists perform femininity, and how their performances of femininity are related to

ideas of authenticity. I will consider how Gordon, Amos and Welch in their music and image relate to various norms of feminine appearance, behaviour and expression, and whether these artists be interpreted as performing gender self-consciously; or put differently, what level of “gender consciousness” (Lafrance: 2002:65, 73)¹ their performances contain. The questions just outlined open up to a number of problematic issues. First, “femininity” must be defined, and I will return to the concept shortly. “Performance” must also be explained. It is a word that has many meanings, but which in this context first and foremost refers to two things: The acts singing and playing instruments, composing, arranging and producing music, and the acts of everyday life that constitute gender identity, inspired by the theories of Judith Butler. As will become clear, these two meanings of the word “performance” are not held separate. The problematic concept “authenticity” has also been touched upon and must be defined. But before I can address these issues, I must account for my choice of objects, the structure of this thesis as well as my position on popular musicology.

Choice of Objects

This thesis explores the kinds of femininity that can be found in the performances of Gordon, Amos and Welch, such as dualistic images of women, parodies of the femininity of commercial culture, and the relation of musical style to femininity. My objects of study are chosen from a combination of personal preference and a hypothesis concerning the artist’s relevance in terms of performance of femininity. This hypothesis is a result of certain presuppositions. The artists operate within three distinct generic areas; postpunk/experimental rock, “art pop”, and old-time-country, areas that carry with them different sets of aesthetics and ideologies, leading to different performance conventions and different forms of gender representation. Second, the artists write different types of songs in which subjectivity is represented in different ways, which is probably partly a result of the different genres in which they write and perform. The representation of subjectivity ranges from Amos’ multi-voiced and often seemingly semi-autobiographical narratives, through Gordon’s stylized and self-conscious parodies of femininity and Welch’s nostalgic folktales in which she, as the storyteller, may inhabit a variety of subject positions. Gender identity is inseparable from class, ethnicity/race and sexual orientation, and as I study three white, American, middle-class female performers in this thesis, what I discover will be within the confines of a very specific culture. This needs not be a disadvantage: professor of drama

¹ The concept of “gender consciousness” is used by Mélişe Lafrance in her reading of Tori Amos’s song “Crucify”. Amos’s success is according to Lafrance a sign of increased gender consciousness in popular culture, since Amos makes visible to “gynocentered social problems once considered private and individual” (Lafrance: 2002:73) Gender consciousnesses, however, does not necessary involve feminist consciousness, warns Lafrance, but it does shed light on gender oppression (ibid.).

Michael Mangan has claimed that gender only can be a meaningful term when looked at “*within specific cultures*”, because there are no social behaviour patterns that are confined only to males or only to females (Mangan:2003:8).

Structure

Through interpretations of performances of femininity in the works of Gordon, Amos and Welch, I aim to shed some light on how contemporary female popular musicians present and perform femininity. Like Lori Burns and Mélisse Lafrance (2002), I wish to present readings that are critical to dominant readings, that is, readings that acknowledge how assumptions about gender identity are and have been constructed in many ways. In my readings, I will concentrate particularly on those technical, stylistic, performative, and musico-verbal structures that can be interpreted as expressions of gender identity. Visual representations will be examined, as they make up a significant part of the overall meaning of a musical expression.

Chapter 2, “Smartest girl on the strip”, concerns how Kim Gordon from the band Sonic Youth has created representations of femininity that are both parodic and serious. Gordon’s vocal performances rely on several different cultural assumptions about femininity, such as ideas about how women as more emotional and irrational than men. Images of femininity from popular culture are and filtered through the noisy, guitar dominated post-punk of Sonic Youth, and the effect is that Gordon’s femininity stands out as both intense and detached. Throughout her career, Gordon has sometimes been considered “one of the boys” in terms of her toughness and coolness, yet her performances revolve around the particularly feminine and the ways in which femininity can stand for the subversive.

In chapter 3, “The hidden parts of the feminine”, I examine how Tori Amos’s performances glorify the feminine in an attempted integration of the virgin and the whore. In the song “Professional Widow”, the femme fatale type is represented in music that combines masculine and feminine stylistic features. Amos’s character craves masculine grandeur and power, but not through an identification with or emulation of men.

Gillian Welch performs old-fashioned Americana and has a partly old-fashioned image. She alternates between presenting herself as a typical sweet, virtuous lady of country music and a female version of the rolling stone type. Welch thus relates to the country tradition in a very

free and playful way. Chapter 4, “Ramblin’ Woman”, is about the ways in which Welch relates to the history of country music and how she performs gender through “cross-singing” (Mungen:2006:75), changes of identity presentations and an intense dedication to style.

In the conclusion (Chapter 5) I demonstrate that although these artists are in relatively similar situation, there is diversity to how they relate to musical, visual, and lyrical representations of gender identity. I end with a brief consideration of the political potential of musical performance.

While there has been written some academic work on Amos (Whiteley: 2000, 2005, Burns and Lafrance:2002), Gordon is to my knowledge briefly mentioned in passing remarks (often in connection with her being the “godmother” of the Riot Grrrl-movement), while Welch is examined in a master thesis by Jason Kirby (2006), that I draw upon in my interpretation of her. Although I am indebted to Whiteley’s and Burns and Lafrance’s work on Amos, I think that her presentation of gender deserves further investigation.

Meaning and Dialogue

When I intend to interpret performances of femininity in music, the underlying premise is that music must be understood within the context in which it is performed and listened to. Because musical meaning is reliant on context (Hawkins: 2002:26), the circumstances are part the empirics. The point is that the music does not mean anything except through the processes by which it is made and listened to. Importantly, this also means that music is made of music. Mikhail Bakhtin (1999:91) has famously claimed that any utterance contains traces of other utterances. An utterance must always be understood as an answer to other utterances, because “[e]ach utterance refutes, affirms, supplements, and relies on the others, presupposes them to be known, and somehow takes them into account.” If we see music in this way, every musical performance is in some way a reaction to and an answer to preceding performances. Stan Hawkins (2002:23) refers to Bakhtin’s writings on dialogue and calls for a dialogic understanding of the popular music text and argues that “the pop text becomes mobilised only through its contact with other texts” and with the listener:

[T]he most profound networks of comprehension are found in the banal, ironic, crude, erotic, obscene, romantic, threatening, or self-indulgent sonorous threads that directly impact the body. For the pop text to exist, the listener has to merge into the

music's internal and external space through responsive and imaginative action.
(Hawkins: 2002:24)

Meaning is thus located in the direct experience of the music. This means that the music assumes meaning when we listen to it, and that listening is an active process. I draw on Simon Frith's (1996:192) thoughts on how "we listen by performing". The listener sympathises with the singer physiologically, emotionally (Hawkins: 2002:83ff), often sings (and sometimes plays) along, takes on the persona of the artist and/or the song's subject(s) in his or her imagination (Frith: 1996:198). Susan McClary (2002:21) claims that music acquires meaning when people believe it to be meaningful and act accordingly, a view that I share. Musical meaning is a product of social agreements, ideology, values and world views. Although music has no inherent meaning, the signification and value attached to it through practice – performance, composition, and listening - renders it personally and socially meaningful.

My Position on Popular Musicology

The methods I use in this thesis belong within what is known as "critical musicology". In 1993, Derek Scott and Stan Hawkins presented seven issues that a critical musicologist needs to engage herself or himself with. According to Scott and Hawkins, a critical musicologist must take into account the social context, the analysis of meaning and values, questions of class, gender and race, questions of canon and aesthetic hierarchies, consideration of cultural differences, intertextuality, and the many functions that music has in today's society – with an emphasis on the significations of developments within technology. The early academic writing on popular music, in the 1960s and 1970s, used traditional methods from musicological studies of classical or art music, an approach that has since been contested (see Tagg: 2000 [1982], McClary and Walser: 1990, Middleton: 2002 [1990]). Critical musicology from the last couple of decades has been marked by a relativist and interdisciplinary approach that places it within poststructuralist scientific method (Moore: 2003:4f). As Allan Moore writes, the most central problem within popular musicology has become the question of the text; how it is defined and how it should be analyzed. Moore concludes that since any analysis is an interpretation of what elements are most significant in a piece of music, the object of analysis is the analyst's musical experience (Moore: 2003:6). The analyst has to ask herself why the music sounds as it does and why this matters.

Why does my thesis relate to critical musicology? The multiplicity of functions and meanings inherent in today's popular music will be acknowledged, as I will make it clear that my

reading is but one way of interpreting the song. If the object of analysis is indeed the analyst's experience, as Moore suggests, then the musical situation must be the focus of attention. First and foremost, however, I rely on the methods of critical musicology because I am concerned with the performance of femininity, that is, identity in its construction.

Femininity and Music

As the title and problem formulation suggest, the term "femininity" is in this thesis understood as having no stable meaning, as it can be (re)presented and performed in several ways. Judith Halberstam has claimed that as a result of how masculinity historically has been the norm of humanity – that the male subject has been considered beyond definition, femininity is more related to the artificial and the performative than masculinity is (Jarman-Ivens: 2004:78). This does not mean that masculinity is not performed, but that it traditionally has been *assumed* that women are more mannered in their actions than men are. Although feminism and changes in society at large have limited such assumptions, several factors point to how femininity still is seen as more artificial, more particular, than masculinity. Not least is this discernible in the spectacles of popular music and the discourses that surround them. Women who perform do in some way have to relate to this, and I will return to this in my case studies.

In connection to the idea that man has been regarded as the universal subject, a prominent idea within feminist theory has been that woman is man's Other. Simone de Beauvoir (1997[1949]) suggested that femininity is a role one takes on because one is persuaded to choose to do so by societal powers.² Otherness is inherent in femininity, because when man is regarded as and regards himself as the universal subject woman becomes the empty category that men define themselves against, man's negation (1997:16). Beauvoir is famous for theorising on the ways in which woman is the Other in society, in cultural expressions, in the minds of men and in the minds of women themselves. Because woman's role as Other is created by men's view of women, there exist many myths about how women are, each of which claims to tell the whole truth about Woman. Men's projections of certain traits on to women, in combination with how women actually are and how they behave – which is partly based on their internalization of norm created within patriarchy, form the basis these myths. The myth of woman is static, writes Beauvoir. Actual, live women come in many guises, yet the myth of the "Eternal Feminine" prevails. Moreover, when real women fail to match the

² "One is not born, but rather becomes, a woman" (1997:295) being the endlessly cited slogan.

descriptions of the “Eternal Feminine”, these women are considered unfeminine (1997:282f). Beauvoir’s inspiration on my thesis consists of how I like her want to study the situations of concrete women; I want to write about actual women and how they, through music, relate to ideas about femininity. Myths about femininity are also highly present in the works of Gordon, Amos and Welch, and as we shall see the artists relate to such myths in different ways.

Feminist theory post Beauvoir has forked into different paths, where the main dividing line runs between feminist who claim women’s fundamental equality with men on the one hand and feminists who emphasize and often celebrate the differences between the sexes on the other. The sex/gender distinction, where sex refers to biology and gender to culture and society, has been common after 1955, when John Money introduced the concept of gender (Ebbestad Hansen and Møller: 2001:8). Whether they were sameness- or difference-oriented, second wave feminists depended on the sex/gender distinction, because gender was seen as a social construct that was causing and being part of the subjugation of women. Feminists from this area considered gender a construction rather than an essence, and much feminist theory, for example that of Gayle Rubin or Kate Millett, requests that women be liberated from oppressive gender norms (Hollows: 2000:10). There were frequent claims that to become feminine was to be “colonised’ by patriarchy” and to become “implicated in [one’s] own oppression”, because femininity meant “passivity, submissiveness and dependence” (ibid.).

Hélène Cixous is among those feminist theorists who are concerned with sexual difference and its relation to binaries like man/woman and mind/nature. She is part of a French tradition and follows Beauvoir’s idea that woman has been (and is) regarded as the Other (Humm: 1992:193), yet apart from this shared concept she has mostly nothing but contempt for Beauvoir’s theories. Cixous is reluctant to define “man” or “woman” on the grounds that concrete definitions might lead to fundamentalist assumptions about sexual difference, which she sees as an endlessly complex concept (Bray: 2004:5, 48f). “Femininity” means two things for Cixous. The first meaning is a set of historic assumptions about how women are, and her description of these resembles the second-wave feminists’ arguments about oppressive gender norms. On the other hand, though, “femininity” can also stand for “a subversive, dissident energy which is capable of transforming metaphysics, language, social relations” (Bray: 2004:56), which connects to Cixous’s concept “feminine writing”. This concept can be applied to musical performance. We can in that context interpret “feminine writing” as a form

of musicianship in which inherited gender norms are not taken for granted. I understand music as a medium in which ideas about femininity can be contested and tested out, a free-zone not governed by the same rules as standard social interaction.

Cixous's ideas inform my interpretations of the musical performances, but above all they rely on the theories of Beauvoir and Judith Butler. It is to the latter I will now turn. Butler deconstructs gender as a category. In her view, gender does not exist as an ontological category. Instead, gender is performative, "constituting the identity it is purported to be"(1999:33); performance comes before gender identity or indeed identity on the whole. For Butler, gender is not something one is but something one does; "a sustained set of acts, posited through the gendered stylization of the body" (1999:xv). Over time these repeated acts form what seems like a natural and essential gender identity (1999:43f). In other words, the repetition of norms constitutes the subject. When the subject's actions form this very same subject, the acts of the subject also have the power to undermine the norms of society. Thus understood, one can argue that gendered identity may be constituted, maintained and/or subverted through musical performance, as well as through "the performances in everyday life – greetings, displays of emotion, family scenes, professional roles, and so on" (Schechner:2003[1988]:xvii). If we add to this the fact that music has direct effect on the body of the listener, and that it may therefore alter the way the listener relates to his or her own body, then the potential role music has in terms of rewriting the rules of gender are significant.

Butler wishes to avoid both biological determinism and essentialism, she even goes so far in her rejection of essentialism that she claims that the category sex is just as constructed as the category gender (1993), because the idea of biological sex difference cannot exist prior to society and culture. "Woman" only exists insofar as there are subjects who act out womanliness; both sex and gender are constituted through performance.

While some feminists have claimed that popular culture, with its false images of women, has been part of a backlash for feminism (Hollows: 2000:190f), other feminists have found in popular culture a new kind of popular feminism, with the acknowledgement that popular culture may work in many ways (Hollows: 2000:193f). As Joanne Hollows (2000:195f) writes:

Many feminists working within cultural studies [...] have examined how the entry of feminism into the popular has produced new forms of femininity that are not 'feminist' but do not conform to 'traditional' forms of feminine subjectivity either. [...] Analyses [that] attempt to break down the opposition between feminist and feminine identities [...] [have] a tendency to create a new opposition which allows the new femininities (not feminist, but informed by feminism) to be privileged over 'traditional femininity' which operates as a homogenous, non-contradictory 'other'.

There are indeed many performances by female popular musicians that, at least at first glance, can be characterised as neither feminist nor traditionally feminine. As the issue of this in-betweenness certainly surfaces in my case studies, there is a danger of viewing traditional femininity as the Other. This can however be avoided by being aware of this pitfall.

Queer theory developed in the 1980s and 1990s, partly as a reaction against the strict classification of genders and sexualities within both gender studies and gay and lesbian studies.³ Works within queer theory have shed light on the many consequences of how heterosexuality has functioned as a norm. Queer readings of human relations and cultural representations have opened up for a more plural understanding of gender than what is represented in the masculine-feminine binary (Eng: 2006:136, 144). As a result, heterosexuality can no longer be taken for granted, it has to "explain itself" (Eng: 2006:144).⁴ A major issue within much feminist theory and queer theory is that gender identity has a complex and problematic relation to sexual orientation. Femininity has traditionally meant heterosexual femininity, femininity is those traits which women have (or take on) in difference to, and in order to attract, men. Can music then question heteronormativity in the same manner that it questions gender identity in general? Perhaps it can, because musical situations can function as sites for explorations of sexual identity and orientation. Such issues have been explored within musicology before. In the anthology *Queering the Pitch. The new Gay and Lesbian Musicology* (Brett, Thomas, and Wood (eds.):1994) issues like music and sexuality, sexual difference and the voice (see also Koestenbaum: 2001), and the situations of gay and lesbian musicians were explored. Critiques of the assumed gendered - most often feminine - character of music have also been an issue.⁵ Many writers have attempted to deconstruct the border between the private and the theoretical by bringing their own (queer) sexuality into the discourse on music.⁶ Through this radical move, the writers demonstrate just

³ Writers like Butler, Michel Foucault and Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick have been central the development of this set of theories, which have helped integrate the study of sexuality into the study of gender (Eng: 2006:136, 139f).

⁴ As Calvin Thomas states, "because there is no final 'proof' of heterosexuality, heterosexuality must constantly set about trying to prove itself, assert itself, insist on itself" (Thomas:2000:28).

⁵ See McClary: 2002:17

⁶ See for example Cusick:1994.

how intertwined our views on music are with normative assumptions about gender and sexuality.

In 2006, the anthology *Queering the Popular Pitch* (Whiteley and Rycenga (eds.): 2006) followed *Queering the Pitch*. In this volume, popular music “is not a neatly squared-off discourse; rather, it can be considered as a social force that constructs heteronormativity *and* resistant queer sexualities” (Whiteley and Rycenga: 2006: xiii). In one of the chapters, Stan Hawkins discusses queering among straight male pop artists. Since the 1980s, the “symbolized disruption of gender and sex norms” (2006:282) has been part and parcel of being a pop star. Many gay and lesbian representations in today’s popular music stand for a performance of otherness rather than actual signs of sexual preference (2006:280).

Gender and Musicology

Explorations of gender in music are inextricably linked to questions of sexuality, emotion and subjectivity. One of the most significant contributors to feminist musicology, Susan McClary, is much concerned with such issues. In her 1991 book *Feminine Endings. Music, gender, & sexuality*, McClary offers cultural interpretations of works of music, both “art” and popular, that shows how codes concerning gender difference and sexuality have been passed down with western music, in terms of lyrics/thematic content, performance practice, and, importantly, in the performance and interpretation of *musical structures*. McClary notes that since the late eighteenth century, the belief in music as autonomous has largely prevented cultural readings of musical parameters. McClary cites this as one of the main reasons why the views that are expressed in *Feminine Endings* have been regarded as highly controversial (McClary: 2002[1991]: xi). McClary regards music as a site for social formation, which implies that in addition to being reflections of the gender ideologies that prevail at a given time, music is one of the cultural discourses through which we “learn how to be gendered beings” (2002:7f). Her understanding of music is therefore dialogic: She asserts that rather than just being a passive reflection of society, music “also serves as a public forum within which various models of gender organization (along with many other aspects of social life) are asserted, adopted, contested, and negotiated” (2002:8). More than the intensions of composers and musicians, McClary is interested in the conscious and unconscious “underlying premises” that are attached to musical conventions (2002:xi). Some of these underlying premises concern how gender is to be represented in music. Musical conventions

that signify masculinity and femininity have been developed since seventeenth century opera (2002:7f). Such conventions participate in the social constructions of gender. Moreover, because music draws on “metaphors of physicality, it can cause listeners to experience their bodies in new ways [...], seemingly without mediation” (2002:25).

While I am indebted to McClary’s work in many ways, I find the significance she attaches to tonal areas, and female musicians resistance to traditional closure or to “conform to the beat” (for example in her reading of Madonna, McClary: 2002:148ff) somewhat far fetched. I do agree with McClary in that music signifies, but my own readings focuses more on style and performance than on, for example, tonality and form. Yet, McClary’s work has been groundbreaking within the study of gender in music, and her focus on the social significance of music, and of the role of the body in music, influences my own readings.

Simon Reynolds and Joy Press (1995) offer a critical overview of the history of gender representation in rock, laying bare rock’s “misogynist subtext, the secret complicity in patriarchal values, that often lurks beneath the apparently subversive and libertarian” (xiii). The authors view “rock” - a term which in their book encompasses a wide range of popular music genres - as being essentially a form of *rebellion*. Initially, rock was about the male rebel dramatising himself “*against* the feminine” (1995: xi). Given the marginal roles offered to women within rock culture; “as the object of desire or dread”, female rebels has had to avoid conventional femininity and sing about things that fit into the rock ethos of “passion, confrontation, urgency and extremity of expression” (1995:235). Reynolds and Press identify four different aesthetic strategies of female rock rebellion (232ff). The first is the straightforward emulation of the male rock rebel. Other female rock musicians have infused rock with “‘feminine’ qualities” in accordance with a kind of “different but equal”-ideology. This valorising of the feminine nevertheless runs the risk of confirming traditional descriptions of the feminine as emotional, vulnerable, caring and maternal. Third, we have a more post-modern celebration of “female imagery and iconography”, which involves that the masks, stereotypes and clichés of femininity are turned “against the society that created them”. On the downside, the artists that choose this approach run the risk of being misunderstood and they are condemned to “constant performance”⁷ The last strategy identified by Reynolds and Press is concerned with rebellion against identity itself. Femininity

⁷ If we accept Butler’s conception of gender as performance, being condemned to constant performance is indeed the fate of all human beings.

is treated as a “painful tension” between biology/essence and culture/persona(e). Although Reynolds and Press find this approach to be liberating they warn that it is nevertheless somewhat reactionary in a society where stable identities are demanded. The four categories of female rock rebellion are somewhat simplifying, which the authors themselves admit⁸, but the categories do point at some central aspects of how female musicians have made themselves heard. I have therefore found it relevant to use the categories as a starting point for interpreting the performance strategies of Gordon, Amos and Welch.

Reynolds and Press also claim (1995:269) that woman’s original position as object within rock culture led to that when this culture’s interest in female subjectivity was strong - in the late 1980s and early 1990s - woman was cast in the romantic role of the outsider, resembling the way “‘60s rock admired and envied black experience for the intensity and authenticity endowed by a history of suffering”. Reynolds and Press have received their share of criticism, not least for this juxtaposition of racial struggles and gender struggles. Gayle Wald (1998:606) is sceptical of Reynolds’ and Press’ assumption that new performances of gender has outweighed the performance of race in terms of “rock rebellion” – a term Wald distances herself from, regarding it as “not only potentially condescending but also explicitly masculinist”. Reynolds’ and Press’ use of the concept *gender tourism* as a way of describing rock’s play with gender identity (Reynolds and Press: 1995:xi) is according to Wald conservative and racist – it “reinscribes the stability of gender in neo-colonial terms” (Wald: 1998:606). Joanne Hollows has criticized Reynolds and Press for trying to attach value to female musicians by comparing them to respected artists of high culture; they compare Patti Smith to James Joyce and Throwing Muses to Virginia Woolf and Doris Lessing. “In this they validate some female rock music because it conforms to another aesthetic tradition which is seen as unproblematically superior” (Hollows: 2000:183). Hollows also object to the way Reynolds and Press use the thoughts of Hélène Cixous to “argue that these musicians are working within a feminine aesthetic which preexists, and therefore ruptures, patriarchal language. In this ways, Reynolds and Press’s argument is still underpinned by a notion of a female essence which somehow pre-exists culture” (ibid.) One should in other words be careful with using Reynolds and Press’ writings in critical readings of pop texts. Although Reynolds and Press reveal many important things about gender and music, there are

⁸ “Of course, none of these women are cardboard cutouts, and many have straddled or shifted between categories at one point or another. [...] When it comes to ‘women in rock’ nothing is very clear; confusion breeds confusion” (Reynolds and Press: 1995:234).

underlying tendencies in their writings to reproduce essentialist gender assumptions and hierarchies of value.

Another writer who is concerned with the relation between gender and genre is Emma Mayhew, who writes,

“Rock and pop forms are negotiated through a hierarchical oppositional value of gender, although there are differences in the way rock as a discourse constructing musical identity is positioned against pop. One version emphasizes musical skill and classical notions of musicianship, while another places emphasis on rebellion, energy, immediacy, and originality. Yet, both tend to apply to male performers more than female” (Mayhew: 2004:151).

“Rock” is in other words often used to describe a set of values rather than a musical style, and the values in question are conventionally considered masculine. Thus, interesting questions unavoidably arise when women are “allowed” within the category of rock. Joanne Hollows (2000:186) notes how feminist critics have either dealt with women who perform within masculine rock styles within or styles that fall outside the rock/pop divide while ignoring women who perform within feminine pop styles. The importance of the rock/pop divide has decreased, but “pop music which is associated with ‘feminine’ characteristics has still received little serious attention from feminist critics, most of whom, it would seem, still equate good music with ‘boys’ music” (ibid.).

Lori Burns and Mélissee Lafrance (2002) combine musicological and cultural studies approaches to works of female pop musicians in their book *Disruptive Divas - Feminism, Identity & Popular Music*. According to Burns and Lafrance, the musicians they are concerned with – Tori Amos, Courtney Love, Me'Shell Ndegécello, and P.J. Harvey - represent different aspects of the subversive, and they have altered the meaning of female musicianship (2002:xi). Burns's and Lafrance's method is to read the musical works in opposition to the dominant readings of the mass media, as the dominant readings “marginalize, disarm, and/or efface” the subversive potential of the songs (2002:14).

There are, in my view, some great advantages with the approach of Burns and Lafrance. Placing the concept of “female musicianship” at the centre is a way of looking at music in which performance is given due credit; where identity and meaning are believed to be located in performance. At times, Burns and Lafrance offer demystifying explanations of how certain

musical techniques lead to certain effects, as when Lori Burns describes the chorus of Me'Shell Ndegéocello's "Mary Magdalene" by pointing out how musical continuity and difference are associated with narrative identity and how we perceive a message in music (2002:161ff). Burn's analysis of the pre-chorus in Hole's "Violet" demonstrates excellently how "ironic conformity" to musical clichés can be used critically by musicians (2002:127). Moreover, by pointing to coherences between the discourse of feminist theory and that of popular music, the writers draw attention to the ways in which production and consumption of music interacts with social reality.

Burns's and Lafrance's intention is to undertake close readings that are interdisciplinary. However, the sections where Lafrance writes about social issues, and connects them to interpretations of song lyrics, are separated from Burns's neo-Schenkerian analyses of the music. Consequently, the writers actually tend to fail to account for the social significance of the effects of the music. As I follow writers like Simon Frith (1996:158ff) and Barbara Bradby (2002:70) in claiming that words should be regarded as *part of the music*, I think that Burns and Lafrance should have paid more attention to performance, which they have promised to do by foregrounding "musicianship". Moreover, Burns's explorations of tonality and chord progressions frequently end up devoid of context, while Lafrance in my opinion tends to say too little about which musical parameters give the effects she describes.

Performance

As I will be concerned with performance on at least two levels – musical performance and gender as performance – some remarks about this term are necessary.⁹ One of the early users of both of the terms 'performance' and 'performativity' within academic studies was Jean-François Lyotard (1984[1979]). In his work on knowledge in postmodern societies, Lyotard describes academic research in the age of capitalism as directed towards gaining power rather than truth and thus towards improving its own performance – that is, yielding surplus value; producing more research (1984:ix, 46ff). This principle causes institutes of higher learning to be subordinated the powers of the given society. Notably, the concept performance is here linked to the concept performativity – the effectiveness of a system's "relationship between input and output" (1984:11).

⁹Many studies of performance and performativity owe debt to *How to do things with words* by J. L. Austin (1962). Austin here presents what has become known as his 'speech act' theory, in which he distinguishes between constative and performative utterances. Whereas a constative utterance makes a claim about something that pre-exist the utterance, a performative utterance has the attribute of producing what it names (Butler: 1993:2).

“Performance” means different things in relation to live and to recorded music. Theodore Gracyk (1996) believes that the central medium in rock is the record, the “arrangement of recorded sounds” (1996:1). Gracyk rejects a view he calls “recording realism”, which involves the belief that on a recording, the performance as such is the main ontological category. To get rid of such a view, Gracyk refers to the many songs that are basic texts, “recordings that present songs whose identities are original to the recordings: the identity of the musical work is not determined by reference to the recording’s underlying performances. As such, the recordings *represent* performances [...] rather than *transmit* them” (Gracyk: 1996:43). This is vital to my case studies; it is the “arrangement[s] of recorded sounds” that I mainly refer to when I write about the performances of the artists.

Performance and Authorship

In his book *Making Popular Music*, Jason Toynbee (2000) warns us that we must not lose sight of what performers and audiences actually experience: “The banal but vitally important point to keep hold of is that musicians continue to believe in the possibility of getting across to an audience in the postmodern era. Audiences continue to believe in the possibility of being touched” (Toynbee: 2000:60).¹⁰ In light of this situation, Toynbee offers a new perspective on authorship in music. His starting point is that musical production is not an act of direct expression, but an act that is thoroughly planned, and he ends up with is a model of musical creation that avoids both the romantic idea of a “transcendental spirit” and the poststructuralist “death of the author”-stance. In his view, the death of the author idea has gone too far, because “[r]igorously applied it contradicts any notion of agency, or the idea that music might be made by people. What’s more, it contradicts itself. Its preferred alternatives to the author as source of meaning – the productive text or born-again reader- are just as mysterious in their self-generation *ex nihilo* as any romantic artist” (2000:xiv).

Toynbee draws upon Mikhail Bakhtin’s writing on heteroglossia – the many different languages within a novel, and proposes that “[t]he multiple languages woven together by the author are analogous to the possibles selected and shaped by the musicians” (2000:43). Bakhtin suggests that the author is a selector and combiner of voices – directly in that he places particular languages in the mouths of particular characters, and nondirectly in that the

¹⁰ This point is also made by Emma Mayhew (2004:152), who writes that although the idea of authorship has been repeatedly contested within poststructuralist academic studies, we need to acknowledge its prevalence within the everyday discourses surrounding popular music.

narrative itself has assumes particular dialect. The usefulness of applying Bakhtin's theories to music lies according to Toynbee in the fact that we hear distinct *voices* in music. 'Voice', understood dialogically, is nothing other than "the building block of musical possibility" (2000:45). The "putting together of voices" done "with aesthetic intent", is what Toynbee calls "social authorship" (2000:46). This implies that the social realm is always in some way present in the creation of music. In my view the idea of social authorship has implications for the performance of gender in music. The musician is "a selector and combiner of voices", voices that are in some way based on those that are previously heard in popular music. So when a woman sings and plays, she unavoidably comments upon other women's sung and played utterances, because utterances always respond to the utterances which have preceded it (Bakhtin: 2004:94). Thus, because we experience musical expressions as gendered, she comments upon notions of femininity in music. In citing previous music, she cites previous gender performances. Moreover, in Butler's view she already performs femininity in terms of appearing as a woman in the world. Musical performance can therefore be said to be (at least) double performance, both of gender and of music.

Having located creation in the social realm, Toynbee goes on to discuss performance. Referring to Jacques Derrida's deconstruction of the idea of writing as communication, Toynbee claims that music has the same "attributes of (or pretensions to) communicative facility which Derrida discusses in relation to writing": "it is premised on absence and a profound gap between performer and audience" (2000:61). In an essay entitled "Deconstruction and fiction", Derek Attridge gives this account of Derrida's theories on the relation of writing to truth and presence:

The pure expression of truth, if there were such a thing, would be *immediate*: it would not rely on anything external to it, since the utilization of some outside aid would always threaten to contaminate its purity. But the utterance of the truth – or of a statement making a truthclaim – is in fact always *mediated* by language, language which has its own sedimented history, structural properties and figurative potential. (Attridge: 2000:107).

Since Plato, speech has been held to be more authentic than the written word and a guarantor of presence. Derrida, however, claims that speech is just as much subject to mediation as writing, and that the "immediacy and presence" of speech is illusory (Attridge: 2000:107f). Therefore, one can never say with certainty whether an utterance is meant to convey the truth. Furthermore, the context in which one writes cannot be fully grasped, there are, for example,

“unconscious motivations that underlie certain choices of words” (Attridge: 2000:108). The same is most probably true for musical composition. Thus, writers who regard their work as nonfictional “often write *as* this or that character, the hard-bitten journalist, the empathetic historian, the meticulous philosopher. Perhaps writing is only possible with at least this degree of the fictional – but then the same would be true of speaking” (ibid), writes Attridge, and we should add that the same would be true of singing, playing, recording and producing. This is also interesting in relation to gender performance in music, because if a musician in some way plays and sings “*as* this or that character”, the gender of this character is part of the performance. Here, I think it is possible to perform gender in ways that are freed from expectations of how gender relates to sex and to other aspects of a person’s identity.

Toynbee is as we have seen suspicious towards the idea of truthful expression in music. Because of the ‘iterability’ of a signature message, or performance – it being premised on both possibility and impossibility (the impossibility of purity) - performers take on different strategies. Toynbee considers these strategies to be of varying closeness to its origination - the performing subject(s), and organizes them within four different performance modes. It is to these performance modes I now turn.

The *expressionist mode*, which is located close to the origin (the performing subject), is in fact a strategy which denies that it is a strategy. Within this mode, the music is considered an expression of the artist’s true emotions. The belief in presence that this involves “is contradicted by iteration, the fact that music is always ‘music’, vocalized and external to the subject” (Toynbee: 2000:61ff). The performer, therefore, cannot so much express himself or herself as “sing in an expressionist style”. It is the desperation of the attempt to direct communication that defines the expressionist mode of performance. Although Toynbee calls this a fundamentally reactionary and anti-creative doctrine, he admits that it contains “a necessary urge in any act of performance” (Toynbee: 2000:62f).¹¹

Quite the opposite of the expressionist mode, performance within the *transformative mode* relates to the term “social authorship”. The focus is on the social placement of the music, not the performing subject as such. Thus the origin is not the performer, as it was in the expressionist mode, but almost always “a collectivity, a historical moment or geographical

¹¹ Compare Nehring (1997:130), who writes that “the voice and authenticity can only be salvaged if they are reconceived more subtly, as imperfect products of a continual struggle”. This struggle involves “the dialectic between body and mind that takes place in emotion” (ibid.)

place”, and there is constant mediation between this moment or place and the performance (Toynbee: 2000:63).

Before rock and roll, the dominant performance mode within popular music was the *direct mode*. Within the direct performance mode, the key value is sincerity. New technologies of mass communication (Toynbee probably refers to things like the emergence of microphones and PA-systems in the 1930s) meant a loss of (immediate) presence, and musicians developed “tropes of hyper-intimacy” like crooning and constant smiling. Within rock, such mediated sincerity became highly suspect (Toynbee: 2000:64).

As in the direct mode, performance within the *reflexive mode* is oriented towards the audience, but the difference is that the performers are *aware* of the iterability of their expression (Toynbee: 2000:65).¹² This mode has “become increasingly important in popular music and has encroached more and more on the other modes of performance” (ibid.). Actually, the reflexive kind of performance has meant that other modes can remain or reappear as plausible, and rather than being a symptom of postmodernism, Toynbee asserts, it is “the continuation of agency in a period where other modes of performance have been exhausted” (ibid.).

The four performance modes are frequently combined:

Almost all expressive or direct performances have an aspect of the reflexive or transformative about them. For without such an inflection, monstrous pomposity and self-indulgence (in the case of expression), or grotesque sentimentality (in the case of the direct mode) become all too palpable. By the same token the reflexive and transformative need some sense of ground or communicative possibility which can only be obtained from one of the other modes. Performance, to return to Derrida’s formulation, can neither be wholly pure or wholly impure. (Toynbee: 2000:66)

Toynbee’s performance modes will be useful for my interpretations.

Authorship, Authenticity and Gender

There is great focus on the personal life of performers in the media and in fan discourse (See Brackett: 2000:44ff). The representation of an artist’s image is fraught with contradiction, as

¹² Given the long history of the rock form, claims Johan Fornäs, [rock] authenticity can now only be attained through reflexivity, that is, authenticity is only achieved in a discourse between audience and performer “in which authenticity appears as an an option and a construction rather than a given fact” (quoted in Nehring:1997:63).

an image can be said to arise in a conflict between the interests of the record industry, the individual ideas of the listeners and the artist's own agency. What further complicates the picture is that the music industry obviously feeds on the public's thirst for authenticity; which means that audiences' ideas of authenticity are both created by the music industry and created by the people themselves and exploited by the music industry.¹³ As Rachelle Lynn Ventura (1998:17) claims in her thesis on female rock performers, "it is difficult if not impossible to differentiate the artist's image from the artist herself", because we can never be sure of what comes from the artist herself, what the artist wants us to think about her, and what is "influenced or even directly manipulated by those involved in the music industry, such as managers, record companies, and publicists". Although the idea of the self-expressive artist is in many ways a social construct, there *are* often connections between the performer's life and his/her music. What many writers have questioned is the idea of expression as a direct, communicational, uninterrupted message from performer to audience. David Brackett (2000:2) observes that those who listen to popular music are likely to hear the vocalist as the site of the song's meaning and expressive contents. However, when we examine how popular music is produced, a conflict arises between the notion of the single author and the fact that a popular music recording is always on some level a result of a collaborative effort (Brackett: 2000:14ff).¹⁴ With reference to Lacanian film theorist Kaja Silverman, Brackett distinguishes between the author 'inside the text' and the author 'outside the text'. The former represents the single authorial voice that is formed by the multiple authorial voices that are actually involved in the production, while the latter is the persona of the pop star as s/he appears publicly, e.g. in interviews and (auto)biographies.¹⁵

An important theory on authorship is that of Simon Frith (1996:169f), who claims that in some ways the musician can be compared to the actress. Drawing on Leon Rosselson, Frith (1996:170ff) compares song to theatre. Singing is performance in two ways: Both the words and the singer are given special attention, and it seems that more is revealed about a person who sings than about a person who speaks. Because pop is a dramatic form, "pop singers don't just express emotion but also play it" (Frith: 1996:212).

¹³ As Sheila Whiteley (2005:189) observes, "[Joni] Mitchell's legacy has prompted record companies to find female artists who can be passed off as serious musicians".

¹⁴ I am aware that this last point of Brackett's can be contested by referring to cases in which musicians have played, recorded, produced, engineered, published and distributed their own works. Such cases however, are rare. Most recordings *are* made through collaboration, and even when they are not, *meaning* can still be said to be produced through some kind of dialogue.

¹⁵ In some cases, for example with certain singer-songwriters, we might experience that the author 'outside the text' becomes one of the voices inscribed by the author 'inside the text' (Brackett: 2000:16f).

One important question remains, namely whether a musical expression is necessarily gender-specific – and if this is the case, why. For example, does the female singer-songwriter make up an own genre, that is distinguished from the male singer-songwriter? As Simon Reynolds and Joy Press recount: When Joni Mitchell switched to a more “you” than “I” oriented kind of writing, she was criticised, because “Mitchell’s critics could not accept this distancing effect from a woman” (Reynolds and Press: 1995:254). The same did not happen to Bob Dylan when he made a similar change in his song writing. In interview, Mitchell hinted “that her new detachment as a writer interfered with the enjoyment of (male) critics who secretly relished her portrayal of emotional frailty, because it allowed them to entertain fantasies of coming to her rescue” (Reynolds and Press: 1995:255).¹⁶ Sarah Dougher (2004:150) writes:

We see the ‘I’ used everywhere in pop music, and used to many different ends. Overall, however, when a man uses the personal voice, he speaks of himself and of a common ‘I’, a generalized experience (and in this ways, like the absent voice of authority in the academic context). When a woman uses the personal voice, she speaks about herself and only herself. It may resonate in a general sense, but it is regarded as emanating from the woman herself, as her personal, unique experience.

Situation

As gender is related both to the human body as concrete biological entity and to cultural representations of the body,¹⁷ a discussion of femininity in music will sooner or later lead us into a consideration of the relationship between music and the body. My preoccupation with the musical situation is inspired by the pragmatist aesthetics of philosopher John Dewey (1980[1934]), where art is defined as experience. According to Dewey, the moment of the work of art is a moment where the ‘live creature’ (the human being) actively engages with its surroundings. In such a moment, where the past and the present meet, the human being lives intensely. We may claim that the shaping and reshaping of identity happen in just these moments. According to Dewey, the “working” of the work of art is to “concentrate and enlarge an immediate experience” (1980: 273). In this thesis musical performance will be related to how existentialist philosopher Simone de Beauvoir understood the mind, the body, and society as equally vital to a person’s situation; thereby underlining how physical and

¹⁶There is a parallel here to how in the history of opera since Monteverdi, feminine sensuality and suffering has been exhibited, for the pleasure of a patriarchal audience (McClary: 2002:50).

¹⁷ There are as we have seen those who argue that biological sex difference also must be understood in terms of social construction. See Butler: 1993.

psychic states are co-dependent (1997:69,286). Music is a medium that is particularly suited to represent and question the relations between body and identity. The activities of performing and listening to music emphasise the coexistence of mind and body, since “playing and listening to music are material activities [...] [that] involve potential cross-fertilisation between intellectual, sensual and physical pleasures”, as Alan Durant has put it (quoted in Frith: 1996:138). Susan Fast regards the body in performance as crucial for understanding music, presupposing that recorded music is as kinetic as live music (2001:114, 144ff). Fast claims that the body of the performer is always present in the music, whether it is live or recorded, because the music in either case consists of what she calls “sonic gestures”. Moreover, the bodies of the listeners are directly engaged, through the sharing of an ‘extradaily’ time and of “rhythmic, melodic, harmonic, and timbral gestures [...] which impact on our bodies in a particular way”. (Fast: 2001: 114,131)

The Cartesian split between mind and body can in other words be said to be undermined by music, because in the musical moment the mind and body are always engaged simultaneously. Because the experience of music is essentially about emotions, Neil Nehring claims, the categories of mind and body are blurred within these experiences, and the split between mind and body becomes irrelevant (Nehring:1997:108,118,128,133). This can be claimed because emotion is always both biological and cultural (Nehring: 1997:118). Music is an art form that emphasises the moment, the present, and that relates to how human beings are simultaneously biological and cultural beings; in existential terms, our existence. Thus it can be said that rather than laying claim to how subjectivity, oppression and freedom are to be defined, music calls attention to the moment, the situation of the listeners and (when played and sung) of the performer, involving the simultaneous presence of all the biological and socially constructed factors that make up a human being. Being oriented around situation and pleasure, music is particularly powerful in terms of the experience of subjectivity. Experiences of pleasure in music can function as direct links between music and social reality. Foregrounding experience in the interpretation of music can therefore be a way of entering the discourse around music without separating the interpretation of the sounding music from assumptions about the role music plays in the lives of the performers and listeners. Stan Hawkins (2002) emphasises the ways in which the pleasures of music are connected to constructions of gendered identity:

Experiences of enjoyment and the thrill of music are often wrapped up in the exploration of identities positioned at a distance from our own. The pursuit of escapism and pleasure in pop music allows us to rediscover, reject or even reconstitute personal concepts of gendered identity (page).¹⁸

Music is related to identity because it offers us the combined pleasures of intellectual and sensual stimulation. Hawkins writes about identities that are “positioned at a distance from our own”. The distance between the identifications that are available in a pop song from most people’s ‘everyday’ identity is for example evident in how musical performers are able to take on several identities at once, sing from the point of view of other genders, sexualities, ages and ethnicities than their own, and change subject positions. Richard Middleton (2000:106) reminds us that the kinetic, cognitive and affective gestures that form the basis for musical gestures are informed by culture, because people learn to feel, to experience and to move their bodies through local conventions. Assumptions about gender and sexuality make up a significant part of these conventions. One may therefore suggest that gender identity is related to the physical and psychological effect of music. By foregrounding situation I wish to avoid regarding either the text or the listener as the sole generator of meaning.

¹⁸ Hawkins also writes: “How we experience sound, how we respond to it, how we engage in it through various forms of participation (listening, performing and dancing) is inextricably tied to the question of one’s own identity” (2002:15).

Chapter 2: Smartest girl on the strip

I like being in a weak position and making it strong.
Kim Gordon (Quoted in Reynolds and Press: 1995:246)

In her book *Too Much Too Young: Popular music, age and gender*, Sheila Whiteley (2005) examines how the relationship between age and gender in popular music informs how we interpret the music and the musicians. As Whiteley observes, it seems like “our oldies and goldies are primarily male” (2005:186), and she asks whether for female musicians “maturity all too often equals obscurity” (ibid.). Kim Gordon, who is now in her 50s, but remains an icon and a role model, is clearly an exception to this tendency. Gordon is bassist, vocalist and songwriter in the post punk/experimental rock band Sonic Youth and the only woman in her band. Sonic Youth were formed in 1981 and are still active. Within the youth cult of popular music culture, the aging woman is in an ambiguous position where she can remain interesting and popular through her credibility as an artist or through keeping up a remarkably youthful appearance. Gordon lives up to both of these demands. Most of all, however, her credibility seems to be due to her ability to always appear to be one step ahead of the public’s expectations about musicianship and femininity, and her “coolness”, which is reliant on Sonic Youth’ parody/homage of the history of rock, with “kill yr idols” as slogan. Efrat Tseëlon (1995:93f) connects the fact that female ageing is seen as more threatening than male ageing to how the ageing woman reminds us of our own mortality – which “the beauty system” wants us to forget about:

The ageing woman portrays an unashamed undisguised ugliness that society has placed on the category of woman. And she is beyond the control of the beauty system. Yet even here she is caught up in a paradox. She is threatening if she has given up the fight for beauty and failed to defeat the inevitable. But she is equally threatening if she tries to do just that: defy the inevitable. (Tseëlon: 1995:94)

While Tseëlon cites women who have babies after menopause as an example of those who “defy the inevitable”, I think it is interesting to apply this formulation to how Gordon has “survived” in the music business. Gordon’s mature age –in terms of the standards of the music business - becomes another way in which she is Other, and an implicit fight against age discrimination becomes another part of her punk-inspired rebellion. Needless to say, the first way in which Gordon is Other is by being a woman in a male genre.

Biography

There is apparently some disagreement as to Gordon's exact age, although amongst others Sonic Youth biographer Alec Foege claims that she was born in 1953 in Los Angeles.¹⁹ Gordon originally intended to become a visual artist, a path she has continued pursuing alongside her musical career. She went to the Otis College of art and design in Los Angeles before she moved to New York. While attending Otis, she noticed how many late-seventies visual artists, inspired by the punk movement, started bands. In New York, she started seeking out the opportunity to play in a band herself, "clearly sparked by the scene, since she didn't know how to play an instrument", writes Foege (1994: 34f).²⁰ The scene in question was the New York no wave/post punk musical milieu of the late 1970s, which consisted of artists who wanted to combine "the intensity that comes from the best of punk's in-the-moment/in-your-face anti-aesthetic" with "a largeness of musical project" (Martin: 2002:113). Reynolds and Press emphasise that Sonic Youth emerged from American post-hardcore, a scene that was "notable for its flirtation with ambivalent or taboo material, its aspiration to psychosis" (1995:246). Sonic Youth was formed in 1981 by Thurston Moore on guitar and vocals, Gordon on bass, guitar and vocals and Lee Renaldo on guitar and vocals. In 1982 Sonic Youth's eponymous debut EP was released on avant-garde composer Glen Branca's Neutral Records. Drummer Steve Shelley joined the band in 1984. The same year, the band was rejected by the British indie label Doublevision, before one of its owners, Paul Smith, started Blast First Records "in order to release Sonic Youth records" (Erlewine: 2006). In the aftermath of the success of *Bad Moon Rising* Sonic Youth signed to the bigger indie label SST, on which they released *EVOL* in 1986. Both *EVOL* and *Sister* (1987) granted the band airplay on college radio, the latter album was also written favourably about in the mainstream music press. However, Sonic Youth's breakthrough happened with *Daydream Nation* (1988), released on Enigma Records. The album was very well received, but poorly distributed, and in 1990 Sonic Youth moved labels once again, this time to the major label DGC, subsidiary of Geffen Records (Erlewine: 2006). Sonic Youth's contract with DGC gave them a high level of creative control, which made it possible for the band to maintain a credible image whilst signed to a major label (Erlewine: 2006). Their latest album to date is *Rather Ripped* (2006), which is a return to a more straightforward, yet somehow twisted as always, rock sound after a series of more experimental music and collaborations with performers and composers within

¹⁹ It has also been claimed that she was born in 1958 (Seida: 2006)

²⁰ "Gordon's initial interest in performing was motivated partly by artistic curiosity, partly by a desire to rock. 'I was really into Warhol and pop art, and I thought the next step was to actually be working within popular culture'" (Author: year:page).

contemporary art music. Sonic Youth are as inspired by visual art, notably neo-expressionism, as by music, notably punk. Like the works of neo-expressionist artists, and as we saw this is also linked to the post-hardcore scene, Sonic Youth's songs often revolve around "violence, explicit sexuality, and romance" (Crane: 1987:74) and draw significant inspiration from popular culture, "from the reality of comics, television, and movies, not life" (ibid.). Their inspirations include the Velvet Underground and the Ramones, Beat poet Allen Ginsberg, painter Mark Rothko, Patti Smith, Neil Young, John Cage, Cecil Taylor, often filtered through "high cultural" influences that result of the fact that both Gordon and Moore are children of academics (Martin: 2002:119). Sonic Youth have been widely influential to younger bands, not least in terms of how they treated the electric guitar, using all manner of cheap guitars and unconventional and inventive tunings. In addition to playing in Sonic Youth and participating in various art projects, Kim Gordon co-operated the fashion concern X-girl in the mid 1990s, and has modelled in Calvin Klein advertisements (Foege: 1994:14, Seida: 2006). Hole's debut album *Pretty on the Inside* (1991) was co-produced by Gordon, and she directed two 1994 music videos for the Breeders. Because she has given this helping hand to younger female musicians, and not least because her image and musicianship has had such an influence on other female musicians, Gordon is often called "the godmother of the Riot Grrrls" (Nehring: 1997:158) – the movement of punk-inspired feminist rockers in the 1990s. She married her band mate Moore in 1984 and they had a daughter in 1994. Gordon released an album in 2000 where she collaborated with Ikue Mori and DJ Olive, and has played in the bands Free Kitten and Harry Crews (Foege: 1994:18,190).

The Invisible Tomboy?

By some commentators, Gordon is considered "one of the boys". As I shall argue she in fact is thus described because her approach to musical performance is confusing, conceptual and mixes masculine and feminine elements. True enough, her aggressive self confidence seems to be modelled on archetypal male rock stars, which might simply result from a wish to perform and present an image with the same freedom and nonchalance that her bandmates do it. According to Reynolds and Press, the tomboy in rock is invisible, she "can only be accepted by concealing herself under a veneer of cool, and 'passing' for male" (1995:247).

Still, when one examines the themes of Gordon's musical and visual self-representations, one finds that she parodies of masculine rock star poses to explore cultural representations of femininity.

One reason for Gordon's reputation as a tomboy may in fact be that her performances somehow make her come across as neither girl nor woman. On the one hand, she can sometimes be seen live and in music videos in short girly dresses, and her lyrics are playful and sometimes deliberately naïve. Her performances play with the connection between femininity and the childlike (Whiteley: 2005:115). On the other hand, Gordon's vocal styles, choice of words, body movements and clothes often play on a more adult femininity.

"Woke up and dressed up": Visual Representations



Fig. 1. Sonic Youth in performance.

As an example of how Gordon uses both girly and womanly signifiers, take a dress she has worn in concert that combines the waitress uniform with "Alice in Wonderland" (fig 1). The large polka dots are reminiscent of little girls' clothes and the apron-like shape of the dress points to waitresses and housewives, women that are associated with conservative gender norms. What is more, waitress and housewife are types that arguably represent *femininity as such* in many respects. It seems quite parodic to wear this kind of dress while playing bass in a noisy rock band, as the contrast between Gordon's appearance and her activities is underlined. Gordon's play on girlish cuteness "signifies ironically within the context of punk youth music subcultures", and indeed, within a band named Sonic Youth, "where 'youth' is more likely to be associated with aggression, violence, and crisis, and where youth and

youthfulness are frequently conflated with boyhood” (Wald: 1998:596). Furthermore, the girly signifiers often stand in stark contrast to the contents of the music (Wald: 1998:596).

Despite her age, Gordon has a youthful appearance. Her legs are often mentioned in terms of how good they look²¹, her muscles are visible but her legs look very feminine - long and slim in high-heeled shoes. Her face, however, does bear the traces of the fifty-something years in which she’s lived, and Gordon’s youthful appearance is due to the look of her body, which appears to be the result of hard exercise rather than surgery. By not having succumbed completely to the standards imposed by the beauty industry, Gordon’s femininity remains authentic for a wide audience. Her strong body relates to her physical strength as a tough and cool woman.

In terms of costume, Gordon is, as we saw an example of in Fig. 1, generally just as conventionally feminine as the men around her are conventionally masculine, but while the men often sport a college boy style with jeans and t-shirts and sneakers, Gordon often dresses up in dinner-party dresses or trendy skirts and tops and high heeled sandals. The look is more grown-up than that of the men, her appearance often signifies “woman”. By emphasising her femininity, Gordon acknowledges her Otherness within the band and within rock music in general. Otherness in this context refers both to the fact that as woman, Gordon belongs to a minority, and to women’s consequent marginal position within rock culture. On a wider scale, this conflict relates to core issues within representations of and experiences of feminine identity. While many women reject aspects of traditional femininity on the grounds that the traditional role models are in some way repressive, the same women often subscribe to some traditionally feminine ideals in behaviour and/or appearance. This is not to suggest that Gordon necessarily aims to break with traditional femininity but ultimately fails. Claiming this would involve an implicit view of traditional femininity as the enemy of “more feminist” kind of femininity (see page 9). The point is rather that Gordon’s demonstratively feminine appearance on the stage underline that there *is* a conflict inherent in taking on femininity. The idea of a feminine “essence” or “the eternal feminine” is undermined by Gordon’s performance. On the other hand, Gordon’s whole output plays on how femininity is more performative than masculinity (see page 6). While she seems to be using such assumptions

²¹ This is a good example of how women’s bodies often are evaluated and validated in terms of parts rather than whole. See Burns and Lafrance: 2002.115.

consciously in her musical and visual representations, she can also be accused of maintaining this idea at the end of the day.



Fig. 2. Cover of *Experimental Jet Set, Trash and No Star*

Below I shall give a reading of the song “Quest for the Cup” from the album *Experimental Jet Set, Trash and No Star* (1994), but now let us look at the cover of this album. The cover (fig.2) consists of images of the four members of Sonic Youth, each in a different colour, put together in a collage, where other images can be glimpsed underneath. The layer upon layer look certainly matches the music’s layers of sound. The word “Sonic” is in big, crayon-coloured letters that look as if they are cut out of paper at the top left of the cover, while the word “Youth”, which also looks cut out, is glued at the bottom of the cover, in the middle, over a long, thin, black cut-out. In the middle of the cover is a clumsily drawn star, pink in colour. The title of the album is in black-on white streams at the bottom of the picture of Gordon, who is top left on the cover. Gordon’s photo is in black and white and looks overexposed; there is an unnatural amount of light. We see only her head, upper torso and arms, but it seems from her pose that she is sitting. Her cheeks rest in her arms, and she looks into the camera with a kind of critical and a little concerned look on her face. She wears a dark jacket, and her hair is dye-blond. The other three band members also look into the camera, the photos are probably meant to be portraits. That the four musicians are pictured apart instead of together underlines the impression one is given by the creative partnership, namely that they all have something distinct that they contribute with in the band. But let us

return to the picture of Gordon. Gordon is pretty, but she is not presented as an object of desire any more than the other band members are. The cover is serene and gives a serious impression, much invoked by the home-made look of the design – the DIY quality lets us know that the band are self-driven and self-invented.

Performing Coolness

Paradoxically, the Riot Grrrl movement, which Gordon as we saw above in many ways initiated, wanted to reject “cool”, since cool is connected to maleness. Therefore, girls who want to be cool must do so by becoming one of the boys, becoming tough (Reynolds and Press: 1995:325f). Gordon, on the other hand, is above all cool. Reynolds and Press characterize her thus: “At times, Gordon’s ‘cool chick’, delinquent image is a bit like Joan Jett with hipper reference points and a degree in modern art; this cartoon-like quality is part and parcel of Sonic Youth’s blankly ironic resurrection of rock rebel clichés” (1995:246). Like Hynde, Gordon certainly comes across as “[c]ool as ice, the tough chick tomboy who gets to hang out with the rough guys” (Reynolds and Press: 1995:238). As we can see, Reynolds and Press think that with her theatrical take on performance Gordon ends up as “cartoon-like”. They obviously find her mannered, almost a caricature of herself. However, Reynolds and Press themselves write in a way that often is quite theatrical. The style of their writing makes us know they exaggerating in order to make their point – probably a perfectly necessary strategy for their kind of work, but one that entails that their characterization of Gordon can be agreed with yet at the same time modified or elaborated.

What I find most interesting with Reynolds’ and Press’ description is that the “Joan Jett with hipper reference points” characterization demonstrates how Gordon’s performance invokes the history of rock. Indeed, Gordon plays with rock’s vocal and bodily poses because they are not believable anymore.

“I feel just like a poser”: Performing Gender

Simone de Beauvoir claims that girls are taught to worship men in a religious manner. As female sexuality develops, this admiration of men leads a woman who loves to objectify herself (Beauvoir: 1997:352). The young girl wants to identify with the men she loves and idolizes, and when she realizes that she has to give up this project, she tries to take part in their maleness by being loved by them. In her need to be loved by men, she is not attracted to

the individuality of particular men, by to man in general (2000:747). This religious worship of men can be seen also be seen in rock culture. Gordon herself has “always idolized male guitar players. It was exciting to be in the middle of it but also feel like a voyeur” (Gordon quoted in Reynolds and Press: 1995:326). In Gordon’s performances one can often see the woman who is full of admiration for men, who prefers masculine ways of being to feminine ones. She appears as the kind of woman who identifies more with men than with other women. The traits she possesses that are associated with masculinity are her aggressive confidence and smartness.

In other words, Gordon sometimes seems to try to live up to an essentially masculine ideal by emulating the men she is surrounded by. After all, these men are the role models who are closest at hand. Sonic Youth is an experimental band, they consciously break with tradition, and the women that could function as role models for Gordon were themselves mainly influenced by men.²² Yet Gordon does not fit the description of the “macha” female rockers who hide “feelings behind a mask of cool” (Reynolds and Press: 1995:249). For Gordon’s performances are packed with feelings, she has more poses than the angry straightforward one. Gordon combines “masculine aggression” with a partly parodic, partly serious rendition of conventional femininity, rejecting femininity as essential –as we have already noted – but not as cultural identity. Posing as feminine in her vocal, verbal, lyrical and visual self-representations helps Gordon achieve parodic distance to powerful stereotypes. I claim that Gordon is “posing” because she draws attention to the processes of masquerade. She sometimes plays with what Lori Burns (2002:127) calls “ironic conformity”, performing out stereotypic images of women, representations that fit in with society’s dominant view of gender roles in a way that lets us know that she does not necessarily accept dominant gender norms. On the contrary, she most often signals that one should be highly critical of them.

Glamorous yet careless, Gordon challenges the notion “woman” by adhering, with a critical distance, to the traditional norms of womanliness within a rock band that challenges the notion “rock band” by “performing as” rock stars. She often poses as a sex-symbol while not really seeming to care whether or not she appeals to the gaze of those looking. The aggressive, masculine confidence of such a pose can make her all the more attractive to her fans. Gordon applies masculine confidence to conventional femininity. Gordon thus turns

²² As Reynolds and Press write about the “pioneers of female expression in rock”; the likes of Kate Bush, Patti Smith, and Chrissie Hynde, “[t]o make an impression at all, they had to imitate male rebels and define themselves against the ‘limitations’ of femininity” (1995:236).

“conventional” feminine attractiveness into a confrontation. As she is both pleasant and unpleasant in her invocations of the typically feminine, Gordon’s performances highlight how feminine attractiveness relates to a basic duality, because it is both inherent in the good girl and in the bad girl. Gordon is neither innocent nor vulgar, but she represents sexuality as chaotic, her songs tend to focus on longing and desire as thrilling and empowering feelings rather than as lack. This is typical of masculine rock music. In the blues pastiche “Bone” she offers a feminized version of the cool, laidback blues singer, with the message, “push yr hips up/you’re gonna be free/just for a while”. The themes of freedom and sexuality are revisited in “Quest for the Cup” which I shall return to shortly. But first I shall say something about Gordon’s song writing and musical performances in general.

There is often something unsettling with the women Gordon portrays.²³ One of the performances that Gordon repeatedly has given, especially in the early days of Sonic Youth, is that of a somewhat disturbing and unusual seductress that turns out to be involved in mental or physical violence; sometimes as victim and sometimes as violator.²⁴ Generally Gordon’s song writing is, according to fellow musician Lydia Lunch, “so abstract and so basic, she could be saying anything about anything” (Foege: 1994:191), and the narrators of Gordon’s songs are often detached and cool (Foege: 1994:178). Her approach to making music is conceptual- a rebellion against the modernist ethos of classic rock. Many of her characters are tough, sometimes violent women. The personae she portrays express anger and frustration as well as bliss and intoxication, using feminine stereotypes to give life to the emotions.²⁵ In Gordon’s case, it is not her own “lived experience” that we hear expressed. Rather, we hear tales of other (real or fictional) people’s experiences.²⁶

The electric bass, which is the instrument that Gordon is most known for playing, has come to be considered a particularly feminine instrument within the context of “alternative” rock

²³ Here are some random examples of her somewhat disturbing lyrics: “Protect me demons/ that come at night/ I don’t know what they say/ their whispering/ sends the night air away/ and makes me forget/ I hope they come”. “I’ll take off your dress/ shake off your flesh”. “Come on get in the car/ let’s go for a drive somewhere/ I won’t hurt you/ you make me feel so crazy”.

²⁴ In 1992, Kim Gordon claimed that she writes from the standpoint of anger and that she wishes to transgress what’s appropriate (Nehring: 1997:87).

²⁵ It is however interesting to note that some of the most woman-centred Sonic Youth songs from the near past, with Gordon on vocals, are in fact written by Thurston Moore.

²⁶ I want to thank Jon Mikkel Broch Ålvik for challenging me on this point.

styles, because so many female musicians have been bassists (Clawson: 1999).²⁷ According to Judith Halberstam, the bass in punk (and related styles) can be interpreted “as a ‘masculine’ instrument in terms of its production of noise in the lower registers, but it can also be read as a stereotypically ‘female’ instrument given that many women in rock bands have been relegated to the role of bass player because lead guitarist was presumed to be a male role” (Halberstam: 2006:14f). Gordon does however also play the guitar, for example in “Quest for the Cup”, as we shall see below. Therefore she both fits and does not fit into the female bass player category. Importantly, though, I would suggest that it is Gordon’s output as a whole that makes her inventive in terms of gender identity.

Reynolds and Press (1995:239) hear Chrissie Hynde’s (of the Pretenders) use of her voice is “one of the first, and best, examples of a female equivalent to the classic rock’n’roll snarl/swagger (as opposed to a female parody of it)”. Like Hynde’s teasing vocals, Gordon’s hoarse, untrained, and dramatic yet detached singing give no particular associations to other singers, male or female. There are, however, traces of past voices within popular music in Gordon’s singing – which if we accept the conditions of dialogue, that utterances are always made of other utterances, is a sheer necessity (see page 4). Kaja Silverman reckons that the lowness and huskiness of the voices of Mae West, Marlene Dietrich and Lauren Bacall “connote masculinity rather than femininity, so that the voice seems to exceed the gender of the body from which it proceeds. That excess confers upon it a privileged status vis-à-vis both language and sexuality” (Silverman: 1988:61). This might also apply to Kim Gordon’s hoarse singing. Gordon certainly has the repressed aggression and sarcasm of the female rocker who is “both envious of and repelled by machismo swagger” (Reynolds and Press: 1995:243). Snarling, whispering between clenched teeth, posing threats, moaning and sighing, she impersonates the tension a woman might feel in the boys’ club of rock music. Because of her and Sonic Youth are respected and admired as unique within the discourse of popular music, Gordon is allowed to put on a show that involves as much screaming, sighing and moaning as she desires without being accused of hysteria or some other form of unpleasant excess femininity.

²⁷ Apart from Sonic Youth, “alternative rock” bands with female bassists in the 1980s and 1990s, not counting all-women band, include the Pixies, the Smashing Pumpkins, My Bloody Valentine, Alice Donut, Talking Heads, Coal Chamber, The Cramps, The Auteurs, and White Zombie.

“Quest for the Cup”

In “Quest for the Cup” from Sonic Youth’s 1994 album *Experimental jet set, trash and no star* we hear an example of Gordon’s theatrical singing. The first section consists of the hectic repetition of one melodic phrase in both vocals and band (three guitars and drums), in a punk-like, declamatory style. The drum riff runs parallel to the vocal phrases. The lyrics are a list of thoughts, questions, impressions and expressions in a stream of consciousness.²⁸ “I guess I’ll put some jeans on/ make my lips look redder”, sung in a repetitive, rhythmically exaggerated melody with a ditto accompaniment, plays on how femininity is taken on as a costume, and it is typical of Sonic Youth to use ultra-commercial and mainstream symbols like jeans and red lipstick. Not least, these are *American* signifiers. Such symbolism finds parallels in Gordon’s look, which in a similar manner uses the conventional to in a way that signals a consciousness of the power of cultural symbols. At the same time, Gordon’s singing is in many ways more masculine than feminine. The narrow range of the vocal lines and untrained quality of her voice gives the impression that Gordon is influenced by male rock singers (Ventura: 1998: 51f). The overall sound of this record is lo-fidelity, and in “Quest for the Cup” Gordon’s voice sounds as if it is filtered through a second-class microphone. The loudness of her voice is constant, however, so the vocal character is in the foreground. Gordon does sound as if she is mimicking rock idioms, but it is not possible to point at any particular original expressions that the imitations draw upon. Instead, she mimics rock in general, and the “general” within this genre has traditionally been the masculine. Gordon’s declamatory singing seems to acknowledge that gender identity is constructed in performance: Her hoarse, rather low voice is more womanly than girly, but the non-conforming use of the voice gives associations to the young rock rebel.

The guitars are tuned in unconventional ways. The playing is simple, yet inventive at the level of sound. All the parts are oriented towards the sound as a whole. As I do not know who plays what, saying something about Gordon’s instrumental technique is difficult. However, something can be said about the overall style. Many of the sounds made on the guitars sound as if they are produced by techniques like playing above the fret board and pulling the guitar strings. Indeed, it sounds as if one of the three guitars throughout the song plays nothing but high-pitched noises that often come at the first beat of the bar in the first part and on the third beat of the bar in the blues part (see below). As in much of Sonic Youth’s music, the sound relies on the strategic use of noise. The whirling guitar noise sets the song apart from realism.

²⁸ See Appendix for full lyrics.

When there is as much electrical noise as here, a distance to the world outside the song is marked, and the song becomes a world of its own. This is an important why the song gives the sense of quest for freedom (“I felt so salty-free”). The syntagmatic structure or time-awareness (Middleton: 1990:251) in “Quest for the Cup” is such that we are aware of time passing in a non-realistic way: the song does not imitate life. Disturbance is one of the main elements in this song, and the switch from one style to another; from punk-like rock to blues pastiche, signals an unwillingness to settle down in a particular stylistic area. The result is that artists and listener share a sense of freedom from the constraints of genre.

The song soon goes on to be a slower, stylized blues (00:40). Like the first section, this section mainly consists of the repetition of one phrase. This short song is insisting on itself, being part of the band’s construction of reality. The music never becomes conventional, but is performed with a certain intellectual distance; at any time, the narrative can be interrupted by noise. Two of the guitars play a distorted kind of blues riff, with a fourth that sounds dissonant, in between the sung lines, while the third guitar still adds high-pitched noises. The inventive use of three guitars signals that the band is playing with the blues form. Sonic Youth have an ability to take on board various rock forms with powerful effects, but all the while remaining at a critical distance to the authenticity claims of the genre they draw upon. The chromatic guitar “riff” during the repetition of the phrase “I felt so salty free” near the end (01:41) is a distorted version of a blues riff, one does not often hear so much chromatisism in a classic blues track. Yet the simplicity of form is kept intact. So the song draws on familiar conventions while underlining that these conventions are altered. The instruments interrupt the final words from the sampled woman’s voice, “it’s gotta be hot hot!”. These words are already whispered in an intense way, and the fact that they have to fight for the listeners attention makes them sound even more urgent, once again creating a sense of passion and freedom. At the same time, the cliché of demanding that something (life?) be “hot” creates a distance to the intensity. Such a phrase refers too much to popular culture to be interpreted as serious.

The title “Quest for the Cup” refers to alludes to a sports theme’s fight to win a championship. Symbolically, it is easy to link the title to the idea of ambition. With the sample of a woman saying “All your dreams will come true. All my dreams came true. But now...I have a bunch of other dreams” (01:59), there is certainly the sense of a constant quest for self-realization. Yet, this is idea is at once ridiculed by the fact woman ends this speech with the would-be

singing “ta dum dum” (02:07). Equally bewildering, the final note of the song has an uncertain pitch, the ending is hesitant (02:23). We are not to be too sure about anything in this song. Being critical of its own premises, Sonic Youth’s music keeps the listener attentive, and importantly, flatters the competence of the listener who has an equally self-reflexive relationship with popular culture.

Dave Laing distinguishes between a song’s external and internal levels of communication (Winkler: 2000:45). “Quest for the Cup”’s external level of communication is between Gordon and us, the listeners. To determine what is going on in its internal level of communication - within the song’s words, between the song’s main character and who he or she sings to - however, is not that simple. At the beginning, the main character is singing to an addressee, “Yr the thrill of a million”, but most of the lines that then follow concern the “I”. However, many phrases lack personal pronouns, so that they could both be about the “I” of the lyrics and the “you”. In any case, the relatively fast tempo in which the lyrics are sung makes it rather unimportant to determine with certainty who does what and who is what. But when Gordon interrupts the repetition with the spoken words “this is for Lisa”, the possibility arises that some of the lines in the first part are about a person named Lisa. The next section, the “blues” section, has a more straightforward narrative where the main character describes, once again in short and simple sentences, how she ran away and met a boy and how this made her feel free. The lyrics are, like so many aspects of Sonic Youth’s performances, stylized. The author outside the text is an adult woman playing with rock idioms while the author inside the text is a teenage girl running away from home. The lyrics imitate popular culture, and one does not get the sense that Gordon might be singing about herself. The use of clichés is probably a conscious strategy of detachment. When this level of distance is secured, Gordon is free to invest the lyrics with various emotive and dramatic qualities without the risk of exaggeration. The song is as we have seen full of themes connected to youth; the quest for thrills and new experiences, the wish for freedom. Yet Gordon’s voice is more mature than what we would expect from the character of the song, the author inside the text. In this way, Gordon dramatises the difference between girlhood and womanhood.

Gordon and Feminism

Like many other female artists from the same area, Gordon has been careful not to be directly identified with feminism as a movement. This is probably connected to the so-called “backlash” for feminism in the 1980s and early 1990s. However, “her songs often have

decidedly pro-feminist themes when she addresses such issues as sexual harassment, rape, and the casting couch” (Seida: 2006). Songs with explicitly feminist themes include “Tunic”, “Kool Thing”, and “Swimsuit Issue”. Moreover, “especially in the period of *Dirty* and *Experimental Jet Set* (1992-1994), Gordon gave many interviews where she talked about misogyny and sexism, and she became something of a feminist icon for teenagers and young women especially” (Martin: 2002:120f). On the surface, Gordon’s “feminist consciousness” seems centred on equality. But while she might be called tomboyish in her toughness, coolness and ambition, Gordon as we have seen explores diverse feminine personae and female-centred themes in her lyrics and performances, an approach that approximates an emphasis on and even a celebration of the particularly feminine. In my view, Gordon doesn’t attempt to transcend gendered expressions or achieve a utopian androgyny. Other women within similar genres, including one of Gordon’s sources of inspiration, Patti Smith, did in many ways appear to strive for androgyny. Patti Smiths’ influence on Gordon can nevertheless be traced the provocative and the poetic lyrics, often performed as something in between song and speaking. Although they don’t sound particularly similar, Gordon’s *use of* her voice seems inspired by Smith, and it is the speak-singing just mentioned that first springs to mind in this regard. However, in contrast to Smith, Gordon’s performances acknowledge the inherent conflict of taking on femininity, of becoming feminine, a conflict that stems from how the subject is “[b]ound to seek recognition of its own existence in categories, terms, and names that are not of its own making” and therefore “seeks the signs of its own existence outside itself, in a discourse that it as once dominant and indifferent. Social categories signify subordination and existence at once” (Butler: 1997:20).

Conclusion

Gordon places herself amongst the women who have to recreate rock expression on their own terms, which for her, with her art oriented approach to music, seems to be a great advantage. Gordon’s “self-invention through a critical immersion in stereotypes” (Eileraas: 1997:136)²⁹ is best placed within Toynbee’s *transformative mode* (see page 18) where the performer is more concerned with the location of music in the social realm than with truth to the subject. The origin of the performance is not the performer, but some kind of collectivity; “a historical moment or geographical place” (ref), so that the performance involves constant mediation between this moment or place and the performance as such.

²⁹ Interestingly, Eileraas’ description is originally of photographer Cindy Sherman, whose self-portraits exploit feminine stereotypes in a way that in my opinion has many similarities with how Gordon performs out femininity.

Parody and an intellectual approach to rock can be important strategies for a woman performing within a male-dominated and male-defined area. Kim Gordon occupies her own niche within female musicianship, as she avoids all the typical strategies identified by Reynolds and Press (see page 11). She is a living example of how one's biological and cultural conditions coexist, merge and collide. When femininity is appropriated in such a detached manner, the performer gains the freedom to comment on and challenge images of women while remaining safely within an acceptable position.

I agree with Reynolds and Press when they claim that Gordon's strategy is a "playful but confrontational reclamation of stereotypes and feminine glamour" (Reynolds and Press: 1995:324f). The contrast between "playful" and "confrontational" is indeed interesting. While she certainly emulates male rock stars in many respects, Gordon's performances acknowledge how "[w]omen on the stage are viewed as sexual commodities regardless of their appearance or seriousness" (McClary: 2002:151). Many times, Gordon's performances comment on the idea that women have problems with distinguishing between performance and reality (Beauvoir: 2000:734).

To end where I began (in the title of this chapter), while smartness is not an essentially masculine trait, it has been more related to masculinity than femininity, so that there is a tendency to characterize women who foreground their smartness as more masculine than other women. There is of course the banal cliché of the stupid blonde – the ultra sexual but dumb archetype. In this type, stupidity is related to gender, because the blonde's lack of brains is directly associated with her exaggerated, childlike, yet sexually adult, femininity. I would suggest that Gordon's smartness becomes all the more visible when she plays with conventional femininity, but it is also largely due to her smartness that Gordon has come to be considered one of the boys. Although Gordon often is considered the archetypal alternative rock tomboy, her performances rely on the juxtaposition of different feminine images, many of which strategically exploit the images of commercial culture.

Chapter 3: The hidden parts of the feminine

I don't only serve the Magdalene. I serve an idea. The
idea of the resurrected feminine.
Tori Amos (in Amos and Powers: 2005:63).

“To provocatively invoke the ugly or despised figures of the witch, bitch, and whore is an act of genealogy (foraging through the history of women’s representation), resignification, and potential self-empowerment” (Eileraas: 1997:124). The femme fatale is known from nineteenth century Romantic literature and painting. Virginia Allen (1983: vii) has described her as “a woman who lures men into danger, destruction, even death by means of her overwhelmingly seductive charms”. In the song “Professional Widow”, Tori Amos draws upon the femme fatale-stereotype, revitalising it as a symbol for how women often have to repress certain sides of her personality in order to be an acceptable (i.e. traditionally feminine) woman. Amos deals with the tension between women’s quest for independence and their need to be recognized as women through the eyes of men. In this song, a woman’s frustration that she cannot attain what men have finds an outlet, and the idea of the combined seduction and threat of femininity merge with the idea of the aggression and grandeur of masculinity. Amos gives some startling and extraordinary representations of femininity through using musical techniques that differ significantly from most commercial popular music of the mid 1990s. Sometimes it is apparent that Amos is playing a part, and sometimes one wonders whether she is attempting to let down the guard, intending an expressionist performance (Toynbee: 2000:61).

Biography

American singer, songwriter, pianist and producer Tori Amos was born Myra Ellen Amos³⁰ in Newton, North Carolina, August 22nd 1963, the daughter of a Methodist minister father and a part-Cherokee Indian mother. She won a scholarship at Baltimore’s Peabody Conservatory at the age of five, being the youngest student ever to be admitted. Having developed a rebellious

³⁰ At 17, she changed her first name to Tori after the suggestion of a friend’s boyfriend (Amos and Powers: 2005:53). This aspect of Amos’s image may seem suspect to some – the name change being interpreted as a part of a construction of an artificial image, while to others, it is a sign of Amos’s autonomous and independent spirit.

attitude, she lost her scholarship from the conservatory at the age of eleven. A few years later, in the pursuit of earning her living as a musician, Amos, with her father as chaperone, started working as a bar pianist in gay bars around Georgetown, Washington. In 1984, Amos moved to Los Angeles, where she played several gigs alone and with various musicians before releasing a record with the metal outfit Y KANT TORI READ on Atlantic in 1988 – which was a commercial and artistic flop.³¹ Given one more chance by Atlantic in 1989, Amos went back to what she did best, piano led pop music. In November 1991 Amos released the EP *Me and a gun*, where the title song is a first-person account of being raped based on Amos' own experience, sung a cappella in a mournful, hymn-like melody. Amos's debut album *Little Earthquakes* was released in January 1992, and debuted at number 15 in the album charts (Rogers: 1996:53). Amos had proved to be a performer and a personae of great originality, attacking the piano with boundless passion and energy – she was certainly living up to a kind of rock star myth while using means of expression that are conventionally very feminine – singing about coping with oppression, particularly of the religious kind, personal traumas, adolescence, sexuality, and above all the task of finding one's voice in dynamic mezzo-soprano. Her performances were experienced as an extraordinarily emotional experience by many attendees.

Between the songs, and also in the many interviews she gave, Amos offered stories from her life and unpretentious yet wacky musings on various subjects. The down-to-earth, friendly and open atmosphere of her public appearances has been crucial for her loyal and dedicated fan base, and their experience of Amos as authentic. Not only were they touched by her music and lyrics and the powerful performance of these; in addition the woman herself seemed to be generously offering her friendship to the audience. There are probably also many listeners who related to Amos's rebellion against conservative middle class values, most apparent in her crusade against the oppressive sides of her religious upbringing. "In a way", Reynolds and Press write, Amos "has taken on the persona of the '60s male rebel and feminised it, rewriting the classic dynamic of breaking loose from domesticity and sexual repression as the story of the Prodigal Daughter" (1995: 267). The most interesting part of this quote is the idea of "feminising" a male type, something I shall return to in the reading of "Professional Widow".

³¹ When she read the scathing reviews, Amos realized that her musical career "had become about being accepted instead of making music I believed in" (Rogers: 1996:379). Comments like this one by Amos on her previous attempts in the music business serve to reinforce the authenticity of her current position, by being part of a familiar popular music story – the story of the quest for the "truest means of expression".

Boys for Pele

On her 1996 album *Boys for Pele*³², Amos dramatizes certain myths about femininity. *Boys for Pele* is Amos' most extreme album in terms of representing "outlaw" feminine identity, and the heteronormative notion of 'woman' being defined through her relations with men. In Simone de Beauvoir's account of post world war two French (Parisian) bourgeois women, she describes the kind of woman whose existence revolves around waiting. This woman is locked in immanence, waiting for her justification, her value, her reasons to live, to be granted her from a man, be it her husband, her lover or her father (Beauvoir: 2000:710). The quest for self-worth through the recognition of other subjects is important for Beauvoir's understanding of identity. Instead of struggling to be recognized as subjects, Beauvoir argues that people strive to be objectified, to be allowed to alienate themselves in the gaze of others. The fact that boys and girls are raised differently affects the ways in which they attempt to achieve this alienation. While boys learn to see themselves reflected as independent beings in women, girls learn to achieve alienation through passivity and for giving approbation to men. Thus, for men to be able to dominate over women, both men and women must be willing to become objects. Beauvoir identifies the reasons for women's idealization of men as stemming from women's passivity and lack of knowledge (2000:701), which is a description that hardly fits women in the 1990s. However, the status of man as the one who has power to determine a woman's worth may in certain contexts have significance even today. Amos's performances of femininity on *Boys for Pele* demonstrate how heteronormative society may hide oppressive myths about both femininity and masculinity. In what at one level can be described as an attempt to define her self-worth as a *woman*, Amos makes musical representations of different sides of the feminine. *Boys for Pele* can be interpreted as a parallel to de Beauvoir's account of how many women who are alienated simultaneously justify their existence and their role as other (Beauvoir:2000:15), and the tension between enjoying the advantages of the role as the other (Beauvoir: 2000:41) and sensing that one is not free in that role. The album's sense of personal conflict, related to the virgin-whore dichotomy must be seen in light of Amos's Christian upbringing, as one of the main themes of her work as a whole is what she thinks is the fallacy of the degradation of Mary Magdalene, "the lie about the sacred bride and the sacred bridegroom" (Amos in Block: 1996:45). One of the most striking aspects of the representation of gender on *Boys for Pele* is indeed the prevalence of *dualistic* images of women in western culture. In a quote that shows the degree to which the virgin-whore

³² Pele is a Hawaiian volcano goddess. The title may refer to the popular idea that young men used to be thrown into the volcano as a sacrifice.

dichotomy can bear significance to contemporary women, Amos claims that on *Boys for Pele* she is “working with that Pele energy, that destruction/creation energy, trying to find the balance, because I would find myself either the lovey-doveyset-woviest sweet pea, or a madwoman” (Amos in Block: 1996:48). In the album’s stylistically composite songs, the less socially accepted sides of woman are pondered over. Far from being represented as a part of the essences of the female psyche, these hidden, often to some degree repressed, traits are represented in the forms of negative feminine stereotypes. As Toril Moi writes in the introduction to the latest Norwegian edition of *The Second Sex*, Beauvoir’s theory that women learn to regard themselves as the Other in relation to men, is an attempt to explain how women can attain formal equality with men and still be oppressed. Oppressive *myths* about womanhood are a way of making sure that women who are formally liberated refrain from using the freedom they actually possess (Moi’s introduction, in Beauvoir: 2000:23). In other words, feminism is not just a question of fighting for equal formal rights like political influence, pay, and representation in the public sphere. While the continued importance of this struggle can hardly be contested, Beauvoir demonstrates how our history of treating women as second-class citizens, economically, politically and socially, has served to maintain the oppression of women in terms of the cultural images and identities that, as results of material as well as cultural conditions have been available. Amos uses some of these oppressive myths as a means to explore what we mean by femininity, in order to use musical performance as a way of claiming emotions and thoughts that have been repressed in the pursuit of an identity as an acceptable and desirable woman.³³

My interpretations of *Boys for Pele* and “Professional Widow” are inspired both by the actual music and lyrics and by Amos’s own remarks and by the feminist theories of amongst others Beauvoir and Moi. Yet on a more detailed level, the album leaves much room for interpretation. As “the author outside the text”, Amos seems to sing much about what she told the press was her feelings in the wake of the break-up with her partner of seven years (see Block 1996). But there are also several “authors inside the text”. This is both apparent in the enigmatic lyrics, which contain many specified and unspecified she’s and he’s, and in Amos’s vocal technique, as her voice ranges from a high-pitched little girl voice to a growling chest-voice – often within the same song. Furthermore, the visual representations of Amos in the cover booklet and in the press photos of the time all demonstrate her sense of the theatrical, as

³³ In “Father Lucifer”, for example, she portrays the witch.

Amos poses different feminine types.³⁴ Still, there is coherence to the fragmentation, as the variance in visual representations relates both to Amos's eclectic music and to her own comments about the experience of being "divided".³⁵ The album can also be interpreted as having a main character that undergoes changes on the way to asserting her independence. Such a reading would be informed by what we know about the author outside the text, who in effect might be mixed up with the author(s) inside the text. In addition, the fact that we recognize Amos's voice throughout the album creates coherence. However, as the lyrics are heavy with symbolism and opaque metaphors, perceiving the album as some kind of "story" based on thematic content might depend on explanations from the author outside the text.

Stylistic allusion

Drawing as it does on a diverse range of musical styles and genres, all composed, arranged, and performed within what must broadly be termed a pop idiom, *Boys for Pele* is certainly full of what Richard Middleton calls "stylistic allusion", a form of auto-reflection that relates to Jakobson's theory that music signifies itself (Middleton: 2002[1990]:221). The influences from classical music, including Amos's formal training as a classical pianist, can be traced in several layers of her music. Examples include the sometimes impressionistic, ornamented piano playing of songs like "Horses" and "Marianne", with many altered chords, the string arrangement of "Marianne", the almost Renaissance-like rhythm of the harpsichord figure in "Blood Roses", the classicist, Mozart-like piano figure that runs through "Father Lucifer", and the inclusion of instruments like brass band, trumpet, soprano saxophone, and of course, piano, harpsichord and organ.³⁶ On a pursuit for the "bloodline of the piano" (Rogers: 1996:109), Amos learnt to play the harpsichord for *Boys for Pele*. Her technique in playing this baroque instrument is not conventional, and the songs on which this instruments is used have an original sound that fuses Scarlatti with Led Zeppelin and Kate Bush. There are elements of vaudeville and Broadway musicals in "Mr Zebra", a brief jazz-waltz with swing jazz piano, brass band, absurd, and children's book person gallery, the piano bar-character of the rubato, hoarsely sung phrases of "Agent Orange", the brass band and piano torch balladry of "Putting the Damage on". Traces of rock and roll and heavy rock is certainly present in the

³⁴ "A very young, pale, minimalist image of Tori graced the cover of the March 1996 issue of *SPIN*, while an altogether different Tori – glamorous and sophisticated to the point of Sophia Loren resemblance – could be found on *Musician* magazine's May cover" (Rogers: 1996:115).

³⁵ See quote in Reynolds and Press: 1995: 266

³⁶ "The classical influence in Tori's music comes through in her harmonic choices and articulation. Her voicings are very classical. They're not jazz voicings with tight internal work-ins. It's very grand" (Jon Evans in Amos and Powers: 2005:113).

drumming on “Professional widow”, a song that also incorporates funk elements, especially in the bass, and the blues influence is heard throughout “Mohammad my friend”, “Way Down” with its gospel choir, and especially the slow “Little Amsterdam” and the reggae-like “In the springtime of his Voodoo”. Significantly, portraying the femme fatale within the context of pretty, melodic pop music has a different effect from playing the madwoman in heavy metal or hip hop – styles more often associated with anger - and with masculinity. Amos’s choice of musical styles that are feminine (but that do *play with* masculinity, as we have seen that “Professional Widow” does) is probably one of the reasons why she has been so much compared to Kate Bush, another artist the press has described as mad and provocative.³⁷ Rather than using the existing forms of angry music to sing about the mind’s dark places, musicians like Bush and Amos have challenged the norms of thematic content and musical experimentation *within* the feminine genre of piano pop, and furthermore they have done this using a very feminine voice and with a very feminine image. In her use of her voice, to be more specific, Amos does many times seem dedicated to sound aesthetically pleasing – one of her very feminine attributes (see Ventura:1998:51). Although it is more easily placed within a “bel canto” tradition than is for example Kim Gordon’s voice, Amos’s voice does not sound classically trained. She has obviously attained vocal technique through her many years of practicing as a musician, but her singing remains spontaneous and she is prone to sudden outbursts and changes in texture and dramatic strategy. The same can be said about her piano playing, which obviously *is* informed by classical training.

The cleverness of the musical allusions, and not least the “seriousness” with which Amos’s genre(s) of music are associated, may help maintain her image as feminist, through casting her as a woman with an agenda, a smart and self-made woman who knows what she is doing. In my opinion, this is an understated fact. Amos is nearly always characterized in terms of her emotionality and brutal honesty, and the hard work and intellectual struggles involved in her performances and recordings is seldom given as much attention. Herein lies much of the reason that Amos and several other female artists often are characterized as “ultra-feminine” – the emotional impact of their music serves the idea that emotionality is essentially related to

³⁷ When Amos’ debut album *Little Earthquakes* was released in 1992, critics compared her “vocal style and dramatic delivery” to that of Kate Bush “in evoking both the strength and vulnerability of femininity, so implying either an imagined and spiritual union between the two, or an opportunistic leap into the ultra-feminine of the ‘unruly unconscious’ and its manifestation in both the erotic and thanatic” (Whiteley: 2005:84).

femininity. The same can be said of accusations of irrationality. So not only is Amos particularly feminine, she is also a bit mad.

An Overkill of Symbolism: Visual Representations



Fig.3.Cover of *Boys for Pele*

On the cover of *Boys for Pele* (fig.3), Amos is seated in a rocking chair on the front porch of a New Orleans house, wrapped in a grey blanket-like piece of clothing around her torso and a blue, long, torn one around the lower half of her body. In reference to the quest for the roots of certain power structures, and to the familiar conflict of whether women should gain access to the same privileges as men through asserting equality or through asserting difference, Amos is portrayed as a female warrior, the Artemis archetype.³⁸ Signalling strength and courage, the portrait can be read as celebrating female icons as a means of heightening the value of femininity,³⁹ creating a “war between the sexes” kind of atmosphere – there is an overkill of symbolism here that makes this last point seem rather humorous. The colours of the clothes match those of the house in the background. Amos’s appearance is like that of the

³⁸ As Beauvoir writes, the fact that from the days of early nomadic societies women were excluded from activities like hunting and warfare was a curse for womankind, “[f]or it is not in giving life but in risking life that man is raised above the animal; that is why superiority has been accorded in humanity not to the sex that brings forth but to that which kills” (Beauvoir:1997:95f)

³⁹ At the same time as it invokes such mythic imagery, Amos’s posing with the gun on the porch can also be interpreted as a glorification of historical, real-life women, the “Southern belles [who] had to hold on to their homes after the disaster [the American civil war] was over” (Karen Binns in Amos and Powers: 2005:281). The gun on the cover has links to the Tori Amos-mythology itself: It is associated with the song “Me and a gun”, in which the protagonist fights for survival and refuses to play the role of the victim.

beautiful vampiric ladies of Decadent paintings by the likes of Dante Gabriel Rossetti⁴⁰. With her red, flowing hair and milk-white skin and her part seductive, part disobedient gaze underneath heavy eyelids, Amos has the archetypical femme fatale-look (Paglia: 1990:491ff). Exposing a naked thigh by hanging her leg on the armrest, Amos adds erotic tension to the image - created by the combination of the materiality of her very feminine flesh – it is white, flawless, and soft⁴¹ - and the phallic gun – associated with masculine power - that she defiantly caresses while gazing straight into the camera. Not only the gun, but also the live snake⁴² and the dead rooster on the picture can be interpreted as symbols of masculinity. Interestingly, though, Camille Paglia (1990:286) remarks that western representations of male genitals often use fabricated shapes, like the gun. Consequently, a woman who picks up a gun “hermaphroditizes herself” (ibid.). As we shall see below, Amos does strive to attain “masculine power” on this album. This also relates to how Reynolds and Press claims that Amos has feminized the male 1960s rebel (see page 39). The somewhat exaggerative late romanticism/decadence style of the cover matches the ambitious music; the classically influenced instrumentation, the song structures that are complex in terms of commercial pop music, the dramatic time changes and the alternately breathy, sweet, and wailing singing.

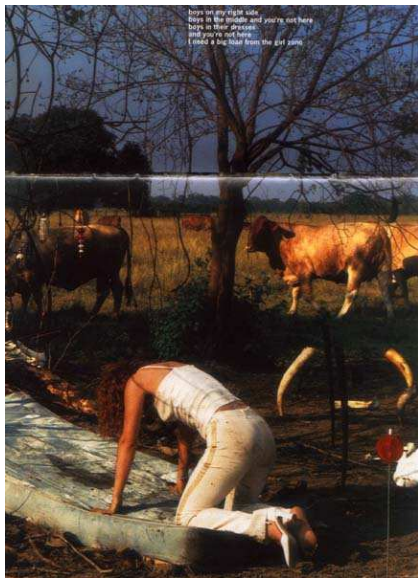


Fig.4 Inside *Boys for Pele* cover booklet



Fig.5 Inside *Boys for Pele* cover booklet

⁴⁰ Rossetti is usually classified as a Pre-Raphaelite painter, but Camille Paglia (1990:490) identifies him as Decadent.

⁴¹ As Richard Leppert (1988:151) notes, in the 18th and 19th centuries (like today), soft skin was a sign of “female dependency”. See also Leppert: 1988:162.

⁴² “The masculine side of the Great Mother is often expressed in serpents, wound about her arms or body” (Paglia: 1991:34).

On another photograph (fig.4), Amos is positioned on her hands and knees on top of a soiled mattress, with her face obscured, partly by the angle of the photograph and partly by her hair. The scene is outside, on what looks like a field, with grassing bulls in the background. Amos is dressed in white pants and a white vest and a white high-heeled shoe on one foot - the latter factor seems to refer to the fairy tale Cinderella, which is closely connected to the “happily ever after”-myth of the monogamous heterosexual relationship. When Cinderella has lost her shoe, however, as Amos has in the picture, she is once again alone in her tiresome life after one magical night with the prince. On the picture, Amos seems to be stuck in this moment rather than on her way to a happy ending.⁴³ Amos’s position on all fours and the loss of human identity with the invisibility of her face signals her affiliation with the animals in the background (see Beauvoir: 1997:16). This may refer to human beings’ animal instincts and to the “bad girl” – Mary Magdalene, Eve, the whore - that so many unwanted feminine traits have been projected onto⁴⁴ She is in a way consciously degrading herself with her submissive posture, but as she does this willingly, it can function as a reverse power strategy; a strategy that finds parallels to her performance of “distorted” femininity in many of the songs.

However, the picture in the cover booklet that has the most potential to provoke is the one where Amos, seated inside some half dark room that could be a barn, half-(un-)dressed in civil war garments, suckles a piglet (fig.5). Apart from referring to Lewis Carroll’s *Alice in wonderland*, in which the heroine has to look after a baby that turns into a pig and runs away, the picture may refer to how the pig has symbolically been representative of “[g]luttony, selfishness, lust, obstinacy and ignorance – but also motherhood, fertility, prosperity and happiness” (Tresidder:2004:388:b). The pig as symbol for human vices seems particularly relevant. One should also note how the dualism of this symbol relates to Amos’s explorations of the dichotomies of femininity. When the inherently female act of breast-feeding is distorted by a replacement of the human baby with a pig, one could come to the conclusion that Amos is feeding the sides of herself that are deemed dirty or inferior by society’s dominant standards.

⁴³ In Amos’s real life, however, she did end up marrying her sound engineer, somewhat preserving the idea of a happy ending.

⁴⁴ The song “Blood Roses”, on the same album, ends with Amos (or her character) snarling (probably to herself) “sometimes you’re nothing but meat”.

“Professional Widow”

The title “Professional Widow” has reference to the Black widow spider - a symbol for the woman who “both seduces and threatens” (Whiteley: 2005:67). For interpretative purposes, I have divided the song into three parts, which I name A (00:01 and 02:06), B (01:29), and C (03:24).

A) “Professional widow” begins with a main feature of the song, a startling harpsichord riff that is minor key, partly chromatic, and resembles a heavy metal guitar riff. In one way, this is a quite clever feminization of a male genre. The riff has ascending empty fifths in both the left and the right hand that start as chromatic and then become stepwise, and an insistent rhythm, consisting mainly of straight quavers, in moderate tempo and 4/4 time. The resonance of the church in which the instrument is recorded is quite striking; after the first rendition of the harpsichord riff the sound resonates in an empty half-bar and creates a sinister effect. After the drums and electric bass join in for the repetition of the riff, the singing begins, accompanied by the same harpsichord figure. The sound of the song is likely to at once strike us as unconventional; the percussive and dry sound of the harpsichord underlines the drama of Amos’s speak-singing. What we hear first is a breathy, mid-register woman’s voice who sing-speaks the words “slag pit stag shit” in a non-melodic pitch. No matter in which way she sings, Amos’s voice has a feminine sound, this is also the case in the first part of “Professional Widow”. The speak-singing technique breaks with the ideals of beauty into which most of the music on the album fits, and gives Amos’s voice an obsessive quality. The words are uttered on the strong beats of the bar, emphasising the almost banal rhythmic stability. At the same time that the drums and bass come in (00:07) handclaps from a small group of people set in. These handclaps seem to be parodic, as they ridicule the chauvinism and banal, “phallic” beats of some of the music genres it draws on.⁴⁵ In between the vocal phrases, we hear the somewhat scary effects of the sampled sounds of a bull⁴⁶. The bull, which is also a link to the cover booklet artwork, has as a symbol traditionally stood for “[p]ower, potency [and] fecundity” and has been “a protean symbol for divinity, royalty and the elemental forces of nature” (Tresidder: 2004: 80:a). Here it is close at hand to read the bull-sounds as a symbol of the masculine power that the protagonist is desperately trying to

⁴⁵ In a way, Amos is performing within a male genre in the funk- and rock-inspired parts of this song (A). With a harpsichord riff where there would traditionally have been a guitar riff, she can be said to parody “the serious world of rock”, like Annie Lennox does through varying her vocal spectres in “Money can’t buy it” (Hawkins: 2002:113).

⁴⁶ “Perhaps the oddest guest is the bull who lived at the farm next door to the church. During the recording, it soon became apparent that the bull, whose incredible bellows could be heard every night, simply had to be part of ‘Professional Widow’” (Rogers: 1997:109). We can also hear “the unprecedented sampling of the genuine sound of a farmer shovelling bullshit” (Rogers: 1997:111).

attain for herself. As we see from the above quote from Tresidder's dictionary of symbols, masculinity is connected to royalty in the symbol of the bull – the ultimate impersonation of masculine power and glory. Somewhat eerie, the outbursts of the bull also have the effect of increasing the sinister atmosphere created by the dry, minor-key harpsichord sounds. Like the photograph in fig. 4, the presence of the bull also seems to comment on the idea of the female character as driven by animal instincts, corporeal and irrational. Moreover, the harpsichord-led parts are contagiously rhythmic, emphasising the bodily, relating to the idea of woman as body, and to the whore. Once again there is an overkill of symbolism here, which I interpret as a sign of Amos's sense of humour, but which could easily be taken as a sign of pretentiousness. Amos is most often recognised as a talented musician and composer, but her humour and wit are frequently overlooked. Instead, the "all-too-female" elements in her work are drawn into the light, and while she is hailed by many feminists, sometimes she is equally dismissed as over-emotional, pathetic, and, as are many feminists, accused of being hostile towards men (see Attinello:2006:225f).

Throughout the A parts of the song, the bass is steady and funky, contributing to a simultaneously ironic and seductive performance. In fact, the point seems to be that the level of irony and the level of seduction cannot be neatly separated. The affective rhythm draws the listener in and seduces her into empathising with the widow. The widow's seductiveness lies in how the rhythms invite participation, how they directly affect the listeners' bodies.⁴⁷ The funky groove accompanying the harsh utterances of the femme fatale who convinces her man to kill himself reinforces the bitterness that makes this narrative possible, because the enjoyment the musicians and listeners feel clouds and distorts the anger of the lyrics. As such, the song acknowledges that music is entertainment, and that it is a medium, and, to use Toynbee's terms, Amos's is a 'reflexive' performance that "includes a strong awareness of its own, iterative nature" (Toynbee: 2000:65). As Amos sings "Gonna strike a deal, make him feel like a congressman" (00:58), her voice turns more sophisticated, the expression more contained. In the next phrase, however, "running in the family/ it runs in the family" (01:06) the vocals are produced with strain, an expressionist performance strategy (Toynbee: 2000:61f). When Amos holds the word "family" in an exaggerated glissando (01:11), the bass moves chromatically downwards at the point when Amos's voice glides upwards, while the other instruments pause. Chromatic movement, which we also encounter in the main harpsichord riff of this song, has in the opera tradition been a signifier of feminine madness

⁴⁷ This point was inspired by McClary's description of *Carmen* (2002:57).

(McClary: 2002: 81,100), and Amos's wailing of the word "family", may make her sound out of control.⁴⁸ Moreover, she is obviously finding some enjoyment in performing as madwoman. This is perhaps not so surprising if we look at the history of western art music. "In opera", writes Susan McClary, "the madwoman is given the music of greatest stylistic privilege, the music that seems to do what is more quintessentially *musical*, as opposed to verbal or conventional" (McClary: 2002:102). Amos's vocal excess in "Professional widow" somehow belongs in this tradition. In some ways, her style of singing and playing occupies the same space of intensity as much rock music – thus, she shamelessly inhabits a masculine area. At the same time, her music never stops making a point out of the fact that she is a woman. This is an answer to a culture in which women's gender is more frequently noted than a man's. The music, as such, examines what cultural ideas women are made of.

B) After one verse, as we are just getting into the groove of the A section, the musical flow is interrupted by a contrasting section (01:29). While in part A Amos plays with masculine pomposity, in part B she explores the female entertainer. We hear piano instead of harpsichord. We also hear a bass, and after a while electric guitar. In the major key, Amos performs out sweetness with her high pitched vocals and the breathy singing with traditionally graceful melodic elaborations. The minor-major shift may signal a "change from suppression to hope" (Mungen: 2006:69). Repeating the phrase (01:47), Amos begins with the words "beautiful angel", and her voice sounds quite like how we might imagine that the voice of a beautiful angel would sound. The beautiful angel may make us think of well-known feminine archetypes, such as the Victorian "angel in the house". Thus we an explicit reference to the dualisms of femininity, as the woman we just heard in the A part was far from an angel. In contrast to parts of the A section, the B section is *cantabile* throughout, another "angelic" feature. However, the B part has above all a cabaret sound to it, with its sweet lyrics that imitate reassurance. The sound in this part is typical of many of Amos' songs.

Musical styles can work as metaphors, and the swing-infused piano playing and high-pitched, playful voice are musical signifiers that evoke representations of the femme fatale in the history of western music; night club singers, striptease. Slow swing jazz is frequently used in movies to signify female sexuality. As Kathryn Kalinak writes about Hollywood's musical conventions:

⁴⁸ As Whiteley (2005:94) notes, the high feminine voices signifies a sense of being out of control.

Certain types of instrumentation, melody, harmony and rhythm came to denote certain types of women. These musical stereotypes helped to determine the audience's response to and evaluation of female characters, and like signposts, directed the audience towards the 'correct' estimation of a woman's character ... The fallen woman was characterized by a nucleus of musical practices which carried indecent implications through an association with so-called decadent musical forms such as jazz, the blues, honky-tonk, and ragtime (quoted in Frith: 1996:121).

The music in the B part "Professional Widow" certainly draws on such conventions. Amos's voice has a peculiar reverb in this part, which is probably due to the resonance of the church. The reverb is first and foremost a stylistic device, and as it places Amos within a large room it adds coldness and detachedness to the beauty of the voice. The choice of the church as recording space both relates to the idea of patriarchy, and to a certain pomposity and ambition. Vocally, Amos is reminiscent of Kate Bush, whose "seemingly unnaturally high register [...] assumes both childlike qualities in its purity of tone and an underlying eroticism in its sinuous melodic contours and obsessive vocalised femininity, provides the first indication of her ability to create a new kind of feminised language in popular music" (Whiteley: 2005:9). The B section is very short, like a parenthesis, yet it is quite startling, and one feels that the song follows a kind of stream of consciousness narrative.

C) After the second verse, which is mostly similar to the first A part, there comes a kind of coda where irregular time changes drag the music towards its closure (03:24). With its repetitive lyrics and harpsichord chords, the C part somewhat resembles an opera recitative. In operatic fashion, Amos drags out the syllables to fit the music, giving the performance an obsessive quality. We hear a different sound of bull here, more ghost-like, and the pitch of the bull's cries is technologically altered to be in tune with music. The voice is nagging and the repetitions are angular. Stylistically, the music belongs first and foremost in a rock idiom, but Amos invokes both the blues singer and the opera diva. As in many blues performances, anger and frustration are presented as feelings that involve both confidence and despair. The "Professional Widow" character, and Amos herself, attains power through her competent musicianship. Musical skill has often been related to masculinity, especially when it is 'technical' rather than 'natural' – that is, when it involves playing an instrument. In this way, the widow's musical explorations is the sound of a woman trying to access her own power in the manner of a rock guitarist or a 19th century piano virtuoso - by combining technical skill with aggression and sexuality – which obviously relates to the album's cover picture with the

gun.⁴⁹ At the times when Amos's vocal expression is most intense, the lyrics become less important and we are drawn into the texture and body of the voice.⁵⁰

"Professional Widow" breaks with popular music conventions, but it also relies on them, as in the pseudo heavy rock of the A part and the nightclub jazz of the B part. Part C is harder to classify, and is less teleological; one could not easily predict that the music would take this turn. Amos's song structures seem made to fit the free-form, metaphorical lyrics, so that it seems that in the end she had to break out of the barriers of the strictly verse-chorus-verse form in order to be able to express herself. This is another aspect of Amos's performance that fits into Toynbee's expressionist mode. Amos displays virtuosic technique in both her playing and singing. She plays the harpsichord in a very unusual way, part a mocking of how rock takes itself seriously and part a wish to create novel sounds. In the B part, she obviously draws upon her experience from piano bars.

Concerning syntagmatic structure (Middleton: 1990:251), the recurring verse gives the song a sense of narrative, as does the repetition of the ending of the verse "it's running in the family". This phrase leads over to unknown territory each time, first to the bridge and then to the coda. There is as we have noted a setting up of a standard song format, which Amos then breaks out of. This is a major reason why the song gives the impression of *excess* (See McClary: 2002: 80ff). Several times, especially when Amos drags out the word "family" to become a shriek that rises in pitch, while the instruments stop playing, the song seems to be on the brink of a breakdown, but in the end, the singer channels her expression into explorations of the limits of the pop song format, as the structure of the song becomes increasingly fluid. Especially the coda, that relates to time unsystematically, makes the song's character seem irrational and underlines the intensity of emotion that the song conveys. One is reminded of how madness has been construed as particularly related to women, and moreover to an "excess of feminine sexuality" (McClary: 2002:81, 84, paraphrasing Elaine Showalter). Amos plays on deviance, and like operatic madwomen (McClary: 2002:80-111), her madness is connected to virtuosity and expressive intensity.

⁴⁹ "Whether Liszt in his matinee-idol piano recitals, Elvis on 'The Ed Sullivan Show', or [...] David Lee Roth, the composer-performer often relies heavily on manipulating audience response through his enactments of sexual power and desire" (McClary: 2002:151).

⁵⁰ "When we surrender to the beat, verbal meaning becomes an accessory rather than a main focus" (Hawkins: 2002:40).

Unlike many of Amos' songs, "Professional Widow" has no multi-tracked vocals. Thus the song's character appears on her own, which underlines the sense that she is self-sufficient, perhaps provocatively so. There are on the whole fewer sonic layers in this song than in most other songs on this album, and one gets the impression of energy that is concentrated rather than spread across a range of voices and instruments. When Amos stops singing the ambience of the harpsichord in the church can once again be heard (04:28), a pompous ending that does sound like a quest for masculine grandeur, invoking as it does the megalomania of much western romantic art music. Also unlike in many of her songs, Amos does not primarily use her tender, high, sweet, girly voice, but a deeper, more mature voice (in the A parts and the coda) that resonates in her chest. As Whiteley observes, on *Boys for Pele* "the girlish and winsome personality of the early Amos is transformed into a feminisation that draws heavily on the Gothic novel and horror film genres" (2005:98).

The author outside the text is searching for her identity as a woman, while the author inside the text is very vague. As in many Amos songs, the author inside the text seems to be metaphorical, like a dream image. But what we assume is that she is a murderous femme fatale that uses her sexuality and charm to lead a man into fatal deeds. Mélisée Lafrance (2002:64) claims that most of the time

Amos's enigmatic linguistic style and complicated symbolic lyricism prohibit the listener from deducing much more than a semblance of authorial intention [in her songs]. The listener therefore enters Amos's music with only a loosely based interpretational schematic, and, as a result, often retrieves her own secrets, fantasies, pains, and terrors, rather than those of the author .

The lyrics of "Professional Widow"⁵¹ read partly as dreamlike association, and features mentioning of starfuckers, congressmen, Mohammad Ali, landslides, suicide, original sin, Judas, and mother Mary. The references are part religious, part sexual in an almost vulgar way ("honey bring it close to my lips", "it's gotta be big", "give me peace, love and a hard cock"), part violent ("don't blow those brain yet), part teasing ("gonna strike a deal make him feel like a congressman", the false reassurance of "rest your shoulders/peaches and cream"). This is juxtaposed with drug references, which may be metaphors for addiction – perhaps women's addiction to men. On the whole, the lyrics read as somewhat decadent and degenerated.

⁵¹ See Appendix for complete lyrics.

At the lyrics' internal level of communication the words are uttered by the dangerous woman, to her victim. The mentioning of the main character's "daddy" is interesting. Suddenly, when she sings "gonna strike a deal make him feel like a congressman", we are not sure whether "he" is her daddy or her male victim, but I would guess the latter, something which involves a switch from second to third person addressee. Switching between pronouns in this way does however happen in many of Amos's songs. The second verse is even more obscure than the first one, and I have no idea what Amos means with "prism perfect" or "what is termed a landslide of principle proportion", except that the last sentence points to the next, "it's gotta be big", which may stand for the whole song's theme of the need for power and grandeur. The coda seems to continue somewhat in the vein of the bridge, with the promise of an afterlife in which mother Mary will supply whatever the victim needs. There is vagueness to these metaphors as well, but there are quite probable references to heroin ("brown" and "white"). Amos's voice hangs in the air as she sings the final words, "give me peace, love and a hard cock", words that clearly have at least a double meaning: We can both interpret this as a woman lusting after a man's body, and as a woman who craves to attain masculine power.

With lyrics like "Don't blow those brains yet/ we gotta be big boy", and the above mentioned heroin references, it has been assumed that "Professional Widow" might be written about Courtney Love, the widow of Nirvana's Kurt Cobain, which Amos has denied. Just or not, this accusation is in any case quite interesting; as Courtney Love has been characterized by the media as the archetypal bitch of the 1990s; an unclean, provocative woman, "hysterical, lurid, ugly, and unruly" (Lafrance: 2002:99). She may therefore represent "the hidden parts of the feminine" as well as any femme fatale-persona, and in contrast to many such personae, Love is considered more of a witch and a madwoman than an attractive but dangerous woman.

A different way to look at Amos' widow is with the help of Camille Paglia. In stark contrast to feminists', and especially poststructuralist feminists' crusade against essentialism, Paglia has claimed that "[m]ythology's identification of woman with nature is correct" (1991:12), that the idea of woman as narcissistic is true (she links this to what she thinks is the terrifying completeness of the pregnant woman), and that man's fear and disgust of woman is rational; it is "reason's proper response to the grossness of procreative nature" (ibid.). In Paglia's view, western society's constructions of science, art and personality are Apollonian shields against the meaningless violence and cruelty of chthonian ("of the earth") nature. "Most of western

culture is a distortion of reality”, she writes, “But reality *should* be distorted; that is, imaginatively amended” (1991:13). This corresponds to how the music on *Boys for Pele* is used as a means to uncover the hidden parts of woman, which would include the harsh reality of how she, through her biological functions, “naturally” provokes fear and disgust. The idea of the femme fatale is examined and called into question in “Professional Widow”, intellectually and emotionally. Our reaction to the song may therefore be said to reveal something about our reaction to what we could call the “demonic”, or hidden, repressed, side of the feminine.⁵² The song also reflects the traditional view of (the fatal) woman as prone to deceive – which is most clearly articulated in the shift from the energetic drive of the percussive harpsichord sound and sometimes out-of-control, increasingly “hysterical” singing with drums, bass and the sounds made by a bull in the first part (A), to the sweetly melodic, bright, high-pitched, major-key piano cabaret number (B). Furthermore, the song as a whole is delightfully catchy and pleasant to listen to, that is, if one is not too discomforted by the demonstratively feminine singing with its passionate breathing and unveiled emotionality. If we accept Paglia’s view of women, this song, through its insistence on feminine forms of expressing anger (fatal seduction, hysteria, keyboard instruments, a sometimes high-pitched and squealing voice) – together with the cover art - exemplifies the all-too-familiar relation of the female with the horrors of nature, relating to our basic existential angst. Paglia (1991:15) asserts that “[t]he permanence of the femme fatale as a sexual persona is part of the weary weight of eroticism, beneath which both ethics and religion founder. [...] She is not a neurotic but, if anything, a psychopath. That is, she has an amoral affectlessness, a serene indifference to the suffering of others, which she invites and dispassionately observes as tests of her power”.

Live Performance

Amos’s live performances are what Paglia would call chthonian: oriented around the materiality of the body, as Amos drools, arches, and humps. Played on the piano, accompanied by bass and drums, “Professional Widow” is just as vibrant and percussive live on the 2003 Scarlet’s Walk tour⁵³ as it is on the record. Amos alters the structure somewhat. She has a very intense look, shaking with excitement. The physicality of the music is in general highly emphasised in Amos’ live shows, drawing attention to the joy and passion of

⁵² For Paglia, “the hidden” is for anatomical reasons (her inability to see her genitals) woman’s basic metaphor. Female anatomy also accounts for women’s “toleration of ambiguity” (1991:22). In other words, Paglia often embraces the very same essentialist assumptions about female nature that poststructuralist feminists so rigorously object to.

⁵³ The last show on this tour is documented on the DVD release *Welcome to sunny Florida*.

the playing and singing, and to Amos' body in performance. Here we reach a crucial point about Amos' performance of femininity. Early in her career, she attracted much attention for the way she attacks the piano, with her legs apart, often humping the piano stool or ecstatically leaning back while playing. Together with her passionate piano playing, her intense vocal expression with its whispers, moans and screams, and her talks between the songs, which often included stories of sexual awakening and masturbation, many of Amos' shows had a sexualized atmosphere. It is unlikely that a male rock star would be charged of having too sexual a performance. When a woman is passionate, is she necessarily sexual? This view seems to rest on an old-fashioned assumption about sexuality. Women should appear as sexually passive, if they are drawing attention to their bodies and experiences of pleasure, they are quickly labelled overly sexual. Amos is often described as hyper-feminine, as too much, in a way that is threatening. This may relate to the fact that "sexually aggressive" women threaten the heteronormative order. As Amos comments, "[women] are penalized if we are able to hump energetically like the men. It pisses people off because we don't need [men] in that case. And it makes people nervous as hell" (Amos and Powers: 2005:94). The effects of Amos's performance are that the state of arousal and abandon that she enacts onstage becomes a public example of how a woman may express her drives and passions, sexual or otherwise. As such, the performances "participate actively in the social organization of sexuality" (McClary: 2002[1991]:9). When the audience looks at a performer who expresses herself freely through her body, they may gain confidence (Fast: 2001:155f). This is probably very important with regard to Amos, because she demonstrates ways of moving about, ways of having a female body that is freed from the restrictions of daily life and that transcends civilized behaviour. She enacts passion and emotion in a realm where such expressions are less censored by social norms, or at least censored by different social norms than those of public life in general.

Amos portrays several different characters in her music, but the gender identity she performs is always very feminine. So in which way does she negotiate a feminine identity in her music? Does she merely "infuse rock with 'feminine' qualities" (Reynolds and Press: 1995:233), or does her shift between different characters attach new meanings to old stereotypes while Amos avoids a coherent identity? Several factors point towards the latter strategy, such as Amos' varying vocal techniques, the theatricality of the different photographs, the mythological and historical references in image and music, and the many shifting characters and forms of address in the lyrics. There is, however, yet another possibility – perhaps Amos

belongs in the group that views female gender “neither [as] an essence nor a strategic series of personae, but a painful tension between the two” (Reynolds and Press: 1995:234), for whom “to be a woman is to be torn between the fact of biology and the fiction of femininity” (ibid.). This way of dealing with gender identity as related to both biology and culture corresponds to Simone de Beauvoir’s emphasis on situation – the sum of one’s bodily, intellectual, and emotional dispositions. With her explorations of personae, Amos hardly rebels “against identity itself” (ibid.), as but then again Reynolds and Press admit that many artists belong in more than one category. This could however be discussed. In one way, using different archetypes may indeed involve rebelling against identity as such, because no stable identity is discernable. The reason why Tori Amos as a phenomenon cannot be said to challenge traditional notions of identity lies rather in the consistency of her image. As Reynolds and Press write, “many of the ‘living in flux’ women also play with sexual personae, bridging the gap between decentred identity and the *strategic* schizophrenia of masquerade” (ibid.). This description fits better to describe Amos than any of the categories do.

Reynolds and Press recognize the tension between the subject matter and the “decorous and ‘feminine’” sound of Amos’ “post- Kate Bush art-pop” (266f). In their opinion, the prettiness of Amos’s music and image can be a disadvantage:

What is most conservative about Amos, and perhaps why she’s been accused of *using her sexuality*, is the surface attractiveness of her music: highly ornamented AOR, centred around her piano rather than guitar riffs, deceptively light on the ears. Just as Kate Bush was underrated because of the prettiness of her music and image, and because she rose to fame at the same time as more confrontational singers like Siouxsie Sioux, so Tori Amos looks tame next to Courtney Love. At times, she does come over as the cute girl performing for Daddy’s attention, too inculcated in ‘feminine wiles’ to be considered a real she-rebel. At the same time, subversion is contextual: with her soft-core feminism, Amos should perhaps be valued as an ally of the angry woman bands – someone who’s opened up a second front on AOR territory (Reynolds and Press: 1995:268).

This is written before the release of *Boys for Pele*, and the sound on this album did break with Amos’s previous sound. I shall therefore admit that Reynolds and Press do have a point in their description of Amos’s music as “pretty” and “highly ornamented AOR” [album-oriented rock]. But when the authors write that she comes across as “the cute girl performing for Daddy’s attention”, I don’t think they pay enough attention to how this may indeed be a conscious strategy from Amos’s end.

As we have seen, Amos's performance contains "expressionist" elements. However, I would not automatically claim that Amos's performance is characterized by the desperation to "truly express oneself" in spite of the fact that musical utterances is always rhetoric while (tacitly) denying that she has any strategy. As we have seen, Amos takes on different characters, which is incompatible with the idea of simply expressing one's true emotions. The direct mode, where the performer convincingly and sincerely gives herself over to the audience, has some resonances in Amos's music. However, the direct mode seems to be more concerned with entertainment than with emotions, and ultimately, I would suggest that Amos offers a self-reflexive variant of the expressionist mode.

Conclusion

In "Professional Widow", as in her music in general, Tori Amos explores and also celebrates the feminine. Whether this implies a belief in femininity as essential or as a construct is not the point. What is relevant here is cultural representation of women and the influence these representations have on actual women.

With its passionate vocal delivery and slightly asymmetric structures, Amos's music often gravitates towards the chaotic. This is one of the ways in which the music comes across as female-centred. Pretty music is considered more feminine than angry, noisy music. When the music adheres to aesthetics from western tonal classical music, it fits the stereotype of the nice girl. What often happens in Amos's music is that the prettiness gets very intense, the emphasis on enjoyment of high registers and trills and elaboration in the keyboard playing and in the form schemas of the songs, which can be related to Cixous's the idea of "feminine writing" and the particularity feminine. Amos draws upon centuries of assumptions about femininity. There is also a celebration of the loss of self and pure enjoyment of music in the theatricality, role playing, forms of address, and genderfucking of Amos's performances.

The experience of emotional intensity and, therefore significance⁵⁴ that Amos's music may create for a listener is a product of several factors. Apart from the direct physical impact of the music, which is the vortex of all the effects, the factors include the emotional and intellectual stimulation of the lyrics and the listener's identification with the authors inside and/or outside the text. Not least do I think Amos's appeal due to the way her performances, live and recorded, centre on musicianship, as her talent and commitment to creating the music

⁵⁴ "When we identify, recognize, or respond to behaviour as expressive of feeling, we are attempting to understand or interpret how something is significant for a particular person", writes philosopher Sue Campbell (1997:126).

she appears to believe in, and that the fans therefore believe in, is beyond question. That she is totally absorbed in the music is evident to us through the intensity, passion, and joy with which she plays and sings. Amos's songs give a clear impression of having been made with skill, as they combine classical, rock, and pop influences in an idiosyncratic way, with unconventional and sophisticated song structures that at times seem improvised.

Success has allowed Amos to tour with one of the least portable instruments that exist – she plays a Bösendorfer grand piano with an abandon and a sense of humour that combines the gestures of an archetypal rock guitarist with the mannered sensuality of a night club musician, bringing an instrument associated with (18th-20th century) bourgeois⁵⁵ femininity, domesticity (Leppert: 1988:156), and immanence out to the publicity of the stage to accompany artfully crafted and catchy pop songs, altering the meaning of the instrument and tilting the category 'femininity' in the same manoeuvre.⁵⁶ The way she sways back and forth on the piano bench, leans back as in ecstasy, spits and drools seems inspired by the likes of Robert Plant and Jimmy Page of Led Zeppelin. As such, Amos combines rock's authenticity, intensity and passion with "*the great indoors*" (Reynolds and Press: 1995:348) of the female imagination.

⁵⁵ In the late 18th century "spinets, harpsichords and pianos were sufficiently expensive to be well outside the reach of the lower orders (not the case with many other instruments) and as such they were secure icons of social distinction", writes Richard Leppert (1988:154).

⁵⁶ In the eighteenth century, "girls and women were for the most part restricted to two types of instruments, keyboards and plucked strings" (Leppert: 1988:147).

Chapter 4: Ramblin' woman

Dressed in '30s chic and looking as if she just walked out of a Walker Evans photo – with music to match – Welch is about as far from a Spice Girl, or even a Dixie Chick, as you could imagine.
Brian Hinton (2003:264).

Well now boys, I'm a rollin' stone
That's what I was when I first left home
I took every secret that I'd ever known
And headed for the wall
Like a wrecking ball
Gillian Welch, "Wrecking Ball"

The particular performativity of country music can be employed to explore gender identity. Performativity, Butler claims, "must be understood not as a singular or deliberate 'act', but, rather, as the reiterative and citational practice by which discourse produces the effects that it names" (Butler: 1993:2). In Gillian Welch's case, her performativity produces both her own kind of authenticity and her own kinds of femininity. In the tradition of a country artist who sings old-time-music, Gillian Welch is not an entertainer or crowd-pleaser; she represents the narrative rather than representing herself. Then again, this selflessness is surely also a kind self-presentation. Moreover, it allows her to sing from both feminine and masculine points of view. In a way, Welch achieves androgyny in an interesting way: She moves from one gender

identity to another, all the while remaining within a realistic kind of expression. For many country music enthusiasts, Welch is authentic through how her image represents the continuity of a musical tradition.

Biography

Gillian Welch was born in New York in 1967 to a seventeen year old girl, her father being an unknown musician who had passed through town. As I will explain later in this chapter, Welch's unknown origins have been an important aspect of her image. Soon after her birth she was adopted by Ken and Mitzie Welch, a comedy team that wrote music for television shows like *The Carol Burnett Show*, and the family moved to Los Angeles when Welch was three years old. While studying photography at the University of California-Santa Cruz, she played in several bands, including the bass in the Goth band Penny Dreadful, and the drums in a psychedelic surf band. When she moved in with people that played in a bluegrass band, her discovery of this music was like a positive shock, and she realized that it was possible to perform the songs she had sung with her family as a child. Around this time she did some rather unconfident performances of bluegrass/Americana on her own. Soon after, the bluegrass band moved out, and the band Sofa moved in, in which Welch played alternately bass and guitar, and which did "[c]ampy seventies covers" (Welch in Wilkinson: 2004:6). When Welch's parents asked her what she wanted to do with her life, she replied "I want to do music" (Welch in Wilkinson. 2004:7), which led to her parents writing a recommendation for her to Boston's Berklee College of Music. At this "jazz school" (Wilkinson: 2004:7) Welch's self taught approach to old-time music did not fit in at all, but she still majored in song writing, and got used to performing music. She also met her partner and musical collaborator David Rawlings at Berklee. After school, Welch moved to Nashville to live where her favourite music had been created, and Rawlings soon followed her. The two of them began performing at songwriter's nights at clubs, and although they were a duo they performed as Gillian Welch. After some success with writing songs for other artists, Welch got a publishing deal in 1994 and a record contract with Almo Sounds in 1995. Her first two records sold about 200,000 copies combined in the United States. In his thesis on Welch and the modern South, Jason Kirby (2006:6f) writes that these numbers are rather remarkable within alternative country, as "[m]ost artists within this subgenre will be lucky to sell perhaps 50,000 records over the course of an entire career". In addition to singing, playing several instruments and writing song, Welch has produced records by, amongst others, John Hartford. She is one of the artists that had great success with the soundtrack to the Coen brothers film *O*

Brother, where art thou?(2000). When Almo Sounds closed down, Welch and Rawlings founded their own record label, Acony.

Alternative Country

Sometimes classified as (contemporary) folk, other times as “alternative neotraditional” country/bluegrass/mountain music, Welch’s music is in either case placed within the meta-genre of “alternative country” (sometimes spelled “alt-country” or “alt.country”). As the word “alternative” implies, the music is defined in opposition to mainstream country music, represented by the likes of “Music Row, with its hat acts and Shania Twain sans Faith Hills and Garth Brooks and ‘Achy Breaky Hearts’”, as Brian Hinton puts it (Hinton:2003:157). Both the performers and the audience of alternative country are predominantly middle-class, white, male, and politically progressive or liberal –in opposition to the conservatism of traditional Nashville musicians. Their self-defined opposition to artificiality and commercial interests can perhaps be traced back to the division between ‘authentic’ traditional music and commercial ‘hillbilly’ music that was drawn by academics and folklorists who studied Appalachian music in the 1920s, at the same time that the first commercial country records were made. In the preface to the 2005 anthology of the magazine *No Depression* - which claims to be about “alt-country music (whatever that is)”, as the subtitle on the cover reads - editors Grant Alden and Peter Blackstock explain that the term “alt-country was meant ironically” from their end (2005:vii). However,

[o]ver the intervening years, alt-country came to mean several things. To the mainstream music industry (*O Brother* notwithstanding), it became code for ‘doesn’t sell’; to fans, it came to describe a network of hard-working bands that fused punk rock’s DIY spirit to country music’s working-class honesty (ibid.).

As Alden and Blackstock’s account reveals, alternative country is defined as related to a working-class identity that stands in opposition to commerciality. But when predominantly middle-class, often non-Southern young people adopt a style of music and types of narrative that are associated with certain historical events like the Great Depression and a Appalachian working-class identity, they invite the critique of those who have a more essentialist understanding of musical genre and identity. Above all, alternative country musicians, with the obvious discrepancies between what they sing about and how they live, have been accused of responding inauthentically to modernity (Kirby: 2006:36). And Welch is no exception (Wilkinson: 2004:9). Still, some of Welch’s music does earn descriptions like having “the

harsh modal structure of the ballads sung in the mountains of North Carolina in the nineteenth century” (Wilkinson: 2004:9). As they are partly modelled on old time Appalachian folk music, Welch’s songs often invoke past-time working class imagery, including the horrors of working in a mine, poverty, alcohol and drug abuse, and death. Much of Welch’s newest record to date *Soul Journey* sounds more like classic country rock than old-time mountain music. Welch is in other words generally experienced as somewhat paradoxical figure. But what does this mean for her performance of femininity? I shall return to this question shortly.

In 2001 Richard A. Peterson and Bruce A. Beal wrote an essay about alternative country for the journal *Popular music and society*. The writers use Peterson’s already established distinction between hard-core and soft-shell performance styles in country music, and claim that while commercial country has become almost exclusively soft-shell while alternative country has taken over the hard-core performing style (Peterson and Beal: 2001:236). The hard-core style revolves around the artist’s authenticity – the artist must through image, looks, and performance style prove that s/he is on equal terms with the audience. In country music, authenticity has traditionally been directly related to the performer’s identification with the (working class) audience (Brackett: 2000:76). Peterson and Beal interpret the alternative country musicians’ drawing upon the music and themes of country music of the past as an escape from their own contemporary problems “through embracing the supposedly simpler problems and joys of imagined past small town and rural ways of life” (2001:236), and that musical styles and “straight-forward lyrics” about “love, death, religion, and working-class identity” are used to ward off the alienation of modern life (2001:239). Generally, alternative country singers resemble rock singers in that they combine youth with a wisdom and/or alienation that makes them stand out. But what sets alternative country apart from rock are the romantic and nostalgic “rural or small town” themes and points of identification (Peterson and Beal: 2001:237). The idea of a romantic identification with the people of the past is relevant in relation to Welch. Americana can easily become kitsch⁵⁷, and in many ways alternative country artists represent a neo-romantic sensibility, a reaction against the irony of the 1990s.

Like many alternative country acts, Welch and Rawlings have created their own blend of Americana, which in their case fuses “old-time music, string-band music, bluegrass, and early country music” as well as “rhythm and blues, rockabilly, rock and roll, gospel, folk, jazz, punk, and grunge” (Wilkinson: 2004:2f). Welch owes musical debt to, amongst others, the

⁵⁷ Thanks to Stan Hawkins for this point.

Stanley Brothers, the Carter family, Neil Young, Bob Dylan, Chuck Berry, Hank Williams, and Bill Monroe. Jason Kirby (2006:22) interprets Welch's blending of genres as a conscious meditation upon Southern identity which makes it possible for her lyrics to mean different things at the same time and to mean different things to different people.

There is an ever present idea that in folk music the narrative tends to not be directly connected to singer as persona. While (auto)biographical discourse greatly informs some aspects of Welch's image, and show up in songs like "Orphan Girl" and "No-one knows my name", we are still not instantly likely to interpret the character in most of her songs in any autobiographical or semi-autobiographical way. And of course, in many cases the songs have old-fashioned words, singing style and (to some extent, although old-time folk/country guitar style is used in many contemporary rock/pop/country styles) guitar plucking, is bound to be heard as a modern recollection of the past, indicative of conscious stylistic choices from the musicians' end – instead of playing within a contemporary idiom, they choose to make an effort with their music and image in order to be able to really indulge in past forms. In other words, because many of the traits of this music are rather unusual in today's popular music, style in itself is foregrounded. No attempt is made to camouflage that this is a rendition of the past in the present. The music and lyrics are not contemporary and they do not try to be. Still, being released in 1990s and 2000s, Welch's songs are statements as much about the (then) present as about the past. The mere choice of playing in old styles puts the artist in a position where she has to deal with certain historical baggage, and taking on an old-time country image à la the women of the Carter family, complete with 1930s and 1940s-style dresses and, at times, almost exclusively acoustic instrumentation, is certainly a statement in terms of gender identity, and I shall return to these issues below.

Welch as Outsider

Hard-core country musicians are those who appear as though if they weren't musicians, they would be "farmers, truck drivers, housewives, or hairdressers" (Peterson: 1997:153). A hard-core image also involves that the private life of the performer is publicly known and that they are interpreted as singing about their own life (Peterson: 1997:153). As we saw above, alternative country artists have adopted the hard-core image, and Welch certainly belongs in this category. There is reason to believe that autobiographical discourse is no less important and prominent within contemporary alternative country than, say, at the time of Hank Williams or Johnny Cash. Then again, Williams and Cash are, of course, two of the heroes of

today's alternative country artists in that they represent "authentic" rather than "commercial" country.⁵⁸ As David Brackett (2000:88) observes, "authentic effects are never natural, simple, or without paradoxical implications". Authentic effects can arise outside their original context, without relation to what originally prompted it. In the case of Welch, her background as an adopted "orphan" is widely known, and reinforces her role as an "outsider", on which the effects of her music to some degree seem to rely. This role casts Welch among the heroes of country music, but significantly, not among the female heroes but among the male ones – "hero" is in any case a very masculine word within this context. Furthermore, in typical country style, Welch has used her life story in some of her lyrics. This seems to be done with an intense dedication to the tradition in which she writes and performs; a conscious but none the less apparently heartfelt modelling of her music *and* image after those of her idols. One could perhaps say that just like the authenticity of "original" country music relied on the similar "hillbilly" backgrounds of the performer and the audience, so Welch's authenticity draws on the fact that she, like her audience, loves and partly identifies with a tradition in which they were not raised. The question of class certainly informs this situation, and one can easily suspect that this is about middle-class youth "exploiting" the culture of the working class from the safe place of their comfortable, economically stable lives.

Regarding Welch's image as orphan, Kirby (2006:129f) writes that this image makes it possible for Welch to cast herself as a rolling stone. She thereby feminises a masculine persona, and "brings to life an oft-ignored figure: the female migrant, and her conflicted, ambivalent perspective within the modern South":

Welch's self-identification with a mythic figure known for his individual power, freedom and emotional distance gives her the agency to examine modern Southern identity from a perspective which would not usually be afforded a 'woman in country' (Kirby: 2006:130).

As the female rolling stone, Welch rejects the traditional story of women as tied to home and family. Popular songs "produce 'orientations toward reality'"(Middleton: 2002:254), and Welch reminds us of the variety of cultural identities that have been and are available to women.

⁵⁸ "In alternative country circles, [Garth] Brooks is often referred to as the 'Anti-Hank', Hank Williams being the defining icon of 'real' country music" (Peterson and Beal: 2001:234).

Welch's Voices

Welch's voice is often described both as vernacular and as having a great emotional impact on the listener. Compared to a female country musician like Emmylou Harris, Welch's vocal performance is very straightforward. This must of course be related to the difference in musical style: Welch's gravitation towards "old time" music involves a singing style that approximates folk singing in that it is not person-oriented. Wilkinson (2004:4) traces these effects back to Welch's vocal technique:

What ornamentation she employs comes mainly from bluegrass and brother-team singing – the pounce on certain syllables, the dying falls, the trills, the quick fades and returns, the small tear – though she manages, partly by the solemnity of her bearing, to give the impression of singing without artifice, which in itself is dramatic.

Welch has the kind of vocal technique that does not come across as a technique. Welch's voice is trained, yet not through schooling but through attentive listening, through the continuation of tradition. Welch's singing style is apparently inspired by both female and male singers, and her voice is not particularly feminine. Kirby (2006:44ff) describes Welch's singing as "seemingly emotionless" and "detached", and posits that the tension between the singing and the stark lyrics make up some of the drama of Welch's songs:

Welch displays singing traits which fit precisely with the 'interchangeable' elements present in modern public voices. What is more, Welch maintains these traits in nearly all her recorded songs and in live performance, creating a kind of continuity across her repertoire which authenticates her in a one-woman musical niche straddling various American Roots genres. [...] At her spookiest moments vocally, Welch creates the impression for her audience that the singer of the song is neither her (Gillian Welch) nor the main character in the lyric's narrative, but rather some ephemeral persona in between" (Kirby: 2006:46f).

While I find Kirby's description intriguing, I also think that he goes a little too far. There is no doubt that Welch sings in a "general" way within the genre. That one sometimes gets the impression that the singer is neither Welch nor "the author inside the text", is hardly unique to Welch. Rather, I would say that this happens often in popular music.

David Brackett describes the effects of Hank Williams' performance of "Hey Good Lookin'" with the terms "denaturalization" and "renaturalization"; stating that while investing words with a poetic quality makes the song unnatural, Williams' "use of a vocal timbre close to that of a rural speaking voice; and the use of dialect, slang terms, and the tendency to drop 'g's at the end of words", reinforces the authenticity of the expression" (Brackett: 1995:84).

Interestingly, Welch has a “false” rural/Southern accent (although she *has* migrated to Tennessee, as we know), which draws further attention to the stylization involved in “authentic” expressions. At the same time, this use of accent is part of the particular kind of performativity that is inherent in country music, and so it does not really represent any challenge to authenticity. This relates to how Simon Frith (1996: 211) claims that a singer is both performing a song and performing a performance of that song. Similarly, the audience is both listening to a song and its performance. What Welch does is merely to freely use certain vocal idioms of country music, and what is essential in this regard is that the accent is *part of* the music, not something that is applied to it from without. The same can in fact be said about Welch’s old-fashioned femininity; it is part of the package.

Welch often sings from the point of view of male characters, and there are certainly possibilities of queering in her music. As Frith (1996:184) writes, “[t]o sing a lyric doesn’t simplify the question of who is speaking to whom; it makes it more complicated”. Because Welch’s cross-singing is so true to the genre, it might be suggested that rather than creating tension it adheres to the audience’s expectations. Almost, because this revival of Appalachian murder ballads complete with an image to match the songs sets Welch apart from most of her contemporaries, country musicians or not.

When Welch sings “as” a masculine character, she is in a way ‘dragging’ the song (Whiteley and Rycenga: 2006: xvi). Frith (1996:187) claims that the voice in music has four roles: It is a musical instrument, which stands for a person and indicates gender; it is a body; it is a person, and it is a character. When the main person in the lyrics is a he, it is the *character* of a Welch song that is male. Kirby, however, suggests that because Welch sings in the traditionally male traditions of “the murder ballad, string-band, and bluegrass harmony duo”, her “performance persona” is masculine (2006:130), that is, she *is* in a masculine position, she does not merely sing from one. Through such “cross-singing” (Mungen: 2006:75), Welch demonstrates how musicians, and consequently also listeners, within the musical moment have the freedom to change identities, thereby entering experiences that are denied them in everyday life, even transgressing the boundaries of gender, empowering both performers and listeners. As Sean Cubitt (2000[1984]:155) has claimed:

The amplified voice commands an awareness of difference and identity, of another greater than oneself yet like oneself, both admirable and available: all the conditions of identification are present. In that we can identify with it, this voice can allow us to

partake of emotions that were not available in ordinary life. The ideal image of ourselves that it offers is the site of a complex organization of our relations with the world, the connection between our inner being and the exterior world.

David Rawlings sometimes partakes of feminine first person's point of view, but one nevertheless has the impression it is more accepted that women sing the masculine narrative than vice versa. Welch's role in her songs is most often that of a narrator, but she is such a good storyteller that the power of the singing voice may indeed make us sense the inherent contradiction and tension between the distance to 'a story' and the presence of 'a voice'.

Welch belongs amongst the alternative country acts that shamelessly employ the tropes of old Appalachian folk-music and the themes of salvation, sin, redemption, and death. Welch's songs are generally centred on the story being told by the lyrics, while the music is non-intrusive. The lyrics fit the measures of the music and the voices - Welch and Rawlings nearly always sing in harmony with each other - are always in the foreground of the mix - which is common in the country tradition.⁵⁹ Welch's voice is however in most cases mixed more loudly than Rawling's, so it is clear that Welch is the main singer and the one who carries the tune. Although she is presented as a solo artist, Welch always appears together with Rawlings. Welch and Rawling's duet style is partly modelled on brothers acts like the Stanley brothers and the Blue Sky Boys, but while such acts usually consist of a lead singer and a tenor, Welch and Rawlings are a lead singer and a baritone (Wilkinson: 2004:8). In addition, a *brothers* act, obviously, does not usually involve a woman. In the videos on *The Revelator* DVD, Welch and Rawlings can be seen singing into just one microphone. Whether they did this when recording the album is not easy to determine, but there is reason to believe that this is the case. It is remarkable how the voices of Welch and Rawlings blend almost seamlessly; we hear a male voice and a female voice that are remarkably attuned to each other. In effect, what we might experience is not just the intimacy of a singer-subject, but also the intimacy between the two singers. The question is whether the listener will experience the connection between the two singers as something he or she cannot be part of, or if the listener may be able to identify with one, or both of the voices, and thereby being part of this union. I believe that the latter scenario is the case. The country duet often has an otherworldly, utopian quality to it, caused by the harmonic blend of two distinct voices and the common breathing of two distinct bodies. However, the male/female country duet belongs to a tradition that is more than a little

⁵⁹ According to David Brackett (2000:77), these factors, along with "the 'naturalized', conversational delivery of the lyrics [...] all work to focus listener attention on the voice".

informed by conservative, patriarchal, and heteronormative values. It is therefore interesting that Welch and Rawlings has adopted the sound of a brothers act rather than sounding like the classic male/female country duo. Unlike in classic country duets, the genders of Welch's and Rawlings' voices are not emphasised. Instead, their voices blend in a way that sometimes makes it hard to distinguish them from each other.

Femininity in Country Music

Welch is in an interesting position in so far as her whole performance partly refers to a pre-rock'n'roll era. The music she is inspired by, and that she implicitly or explicitly refers to, has had female performers from the very beginning (cf. The Carter Family). In contrast to rock, country music – notwithstanding all its heteronormativity and conservative patriarchal values - has never been considered essentially masculine.

Since its first recordings were made in the 1920s, country music has been full of strong women who possess traditional virtues connected to work, family, fidelity, independence, honesty, and simplicity. After World War II, singing about autobiographical themes became more usual, and there were more opportunities for women to record. The fight for self sufficiency and independence were prominent themes. Paraphrasing John Shelton Reed, Ruth A. Banes writes that “the social type presented by most [female] country stars is the ‘good woman’, exemplified by Loretta Lynn, a ‘strong, independent, and ultracompetent’ individual who deals with men on egalitarian terms (Banes: 1992: 84). But this is just one side of the coin, and a central theme in country has been the temptress/virgin dichotomy (Banes: 1992:83f). There is in Banes view much role play in what country musicians do, and rather than expressing themselves as unique individuals, country musicians present “a cultural model or ideal type” (Banes: 1992:81). Concerning women, Banes identifies three such types: The dreamlike Southern lady who represents ideal femininity, the farm wife who is mother and housekeeper and a Christian woman with a natural beauty, and lastly the negative stereotype – the poor white trash woman who is a sickly, amoral, filthy, and victimized, who leads a joyless life. It seems quite clear that all the negative traits that the two “respectable” forms of country femininity had no room for were transported into the white trash, hillbilly stereotype. Welch mixes the naturally beautiful farm wife with the feminized rolling stone.

Susan Brownmiller (1984:2) has called femininity “a romantic sentiment, a nostalgic tradition of imposed limitations”. This could have been a way of characterizing Welch's music and

image. One of the implications of a nostalgic image is that it limits the possibilities of identities, which is probably one of the reasons why it seems so appealing in contemporary society. In taking on a particular type of past femininity, Welch places some restrictions on her own performance, and limits out certain possibilities. In this way, her identification with the whole country music culture is strengthened. Embracing the past in such a thorough way may be interpreted as a refusal of the present. However, it is precisely this distance in time that gives power to Welch's self representations, and at the same time, it is the present range of possible identities that makes an old-fashioned stylization of oneself possible.

Welch's "apparent role models", comedienne Carol Burnett and country legend Emmylou Harris (Alden: 2005:215), and the women of The Carter Family, are of course as conventionally feminine as American women can get. The kind of femininity that Welch displays is characterized by a graceful, committed and somewhat shy behaviour. She is as sweet as Emmylou Harris, but less glamorous, although she *does* dress up, so she has some of the artificiality and theatricality of typical feminine country performers. Welch thus casts herself among the "good women" of traditional country music, or rather, she exploits this stereotype. In so far as Welch's image involves a longing for times past, she might be accused of promoting conservative values. This problem can be seen alongside alternative country's double bind of simultaneously celebrating a past culture and defining oneself against the republican/right wing America traditionally associated with that culture.

The fact that Welch plays the acoustic guitar fits into stereotypic country femininity. As Sheila Whiteley writes, the portable instruments of folk music represent "catching the immediacy of thoughts and inspiration" (Whiteley: 2000:93). This seems to be one factor that upholds the belief in hearing 'the truth' from folk and country musicians. These musicians, so the dominant/popular opinion goes, convey the truth even, or maybe especially, when they are obviously telling a story and/or portraying a character that is clearly not meant to be a representation themselves. The way Welch represents herself in performance underlines this tendency: Her performances are quietly intense are sometimes described in religious terms: "Onstage, during instrumental passages, she bends her head over her guitar, like a figure in a religious painting, and plays with a ruthless rhythmic precision" (Wilkinson: 2004:2). In such intense performance situations, Welch does not seem to be caring much about appearing feminine, pretty or attractive. Similarly, her singing voice has as we have noted a direct and simple sound, determined on telling the story right. Selflessness is also an image, and in this

respect it is tempting to place Welch (and Rawlings) within Toynbee's expressionist performance mode. While selflessness is often associated with femininity, in terms of the woman who is caring and concerned with the needs of others, I would suggest that the kind of selflessness that Welch performs is more androgynous. It is her intense dedication to the narrative that allows Welch to sing from many different points of view, even those of male characters, something that increases the number of available experiences for both musicians and audience.



Fig.6. Gillian Welch in performance

Visual Representations

Welch's looks makes it easy for her to take on the role of the good woman: She is "tall and slender" and has long hair, pale skin, and "unhurried and graceful" movements (Wilkinson: 2004:2) She underlines her rather fragile look by wearing dresses in the styles of the 1930s

and 1940s,⁶⁰ presenting femininity as vulnerable (see fig.6). At other times, though, Welch presents a more cowgirl-like image. According to Sean Albiez (2004:125), “the cowgirl is a problematic proto-feminist figure, as pioneer women were often denying their sexuality and gender to conform and compete with men, playing them at their own game of market relations and the violent subjugation of difference”. “What is crucial to understand is that the cowgirl was not born of vaudeville or Country music as a cross-dressing male/female expression of mythic fantasy and desire, but is a real and vital historical figure and has become an enduring American myth. [...] [W]hen female and male Country artists adopted the Western costume they were undertaking a parodic commentary on this myth while recognizing the potency of the cowboy/girl in the wider culture” (Albiez: 2004:126).

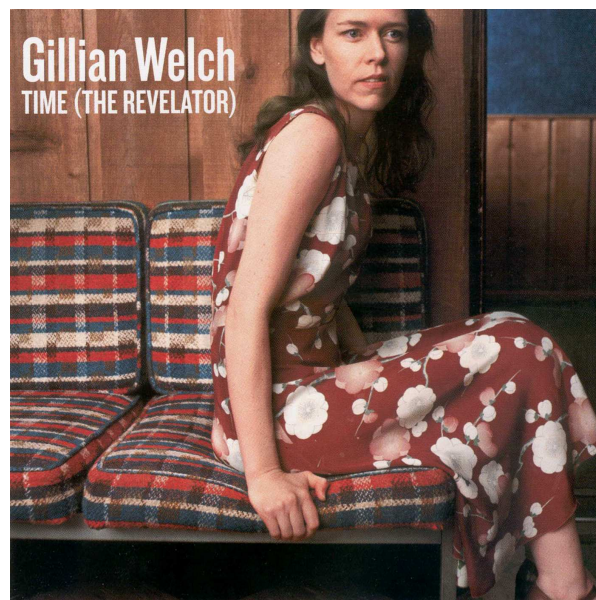


Fig.7 Cover of *Time (The Revelator)*

Below I shall give a reading of the song “Red Clay Halo”, from the album *Time (The Revelator)*, so now I want to look at the cover of this record (fig. 7). We see Welch in a long 1940s style, flowery red dress and red shoes, seated at the short end of a plaid sofa. Her posture is slightly drooping and she looks to the right of the viewer - her eyes seem to be fixed on something. Her hair is loose, she wears no make-up and her face has an ambiguous expression, which appears to be part zeal, part anxiety. Welch looks somewhat out of place, as if she feels awkward posing for a photograph. Thus, by extension, she looks a little awkward to be feminine, to be exposing her femininity, at all. The room she’s in has wooden panels on

⁶⁰ “[T]he original Carter Family dressed in the formal attire that a country person would wear when attending church or going into town” (Peterson: 1997:48).

the walls and we see an open door into another room behind Welch in the right corner of the picture. It is quite possible that the photograph is taken in the legendary RCA studio B, Nashville (reputedly Elvis Presley's favourite studio), where the album was recorded. Because of the slightly official but nevertheless unpretentious look of the room, the photograph exudes an atmosphere that is neither public nor private. Moreover, the cover has a nostalgic quality to it that matches Welch's music.

"Red Clay Halo"

Before country music was transmitted on radio and records, it existed as two different styles. Bill Malone terms the one style "parlor" or "domestic" and the other "assembly" or "frolic". Using a distinction we have already encountered several times in this chapter, Peterson (1997:138) calls frolic music hard core and domestic music soft shell. The parlor style was centred on sung music like "ballads, old popular songs, lullabies, and play songs", mostly performed by women. The assembly style consisted mostly of instrumental music played at events like "barn dances fiddling contests, and similar festive public occasions where male performers predominated".⁶¹ Welch's song "Red Clay Halo" belongs stylistically within the assembly or frolic tradition. But although it is built on a very public kind of musical style, Welch's and Rawlings' performance has a private atmosphere. The song is in a dance form, but it would be easier to imagine someone dancing to it if there was a whole band playing instead of two singers and two guitars. The song also sounds like a stripped-down bluegrass number, devoid of a fiddle. Another reason for why the song sounds more private than public is that the album *Time (The Revelator)* as a whole is stripped-down and acoustic. As the album has a consistent sound, both in terms of genre and mood, one hears "Red Clay Halo" as belonging within its serene sound-world - that is, *if* one listens to the album as a whole.

As mentioned, we hear two guitars; Welch plays accompaniment and Rawlings plays more elaborative answers to the vocals – often in counterpoint, links between parts, and a solo (at 01:52). Welch's and Rawlings's technique is marked by competence and an absolute stylistic confidence. In accordance with the style of the music, the playing is kept steady and simple.

⁶¹ The latter kind of music was the one that "first received commercial acceptance via phonograph records and radio in the mid-1920s", while "[t]he radio formats of the 1930s [...] accenting clean 'family entertainment' [...] brought back into favor many of the elements of the domestic or parlor tradition" (Peterson: 1997:138).

In the song's external level of communication Welch is a woman, she keeps on performing femininity while simultaneously portraying masculinity in the song's internal level of communication. So the author inside the text is of another gender, from another time and from another social class than the author outside the text. In cross-singing, Welch does not alter the pitch of her voice, but her rural accent in this song is striking, leaving no doubt that it is a country boy who is the main character. Listen to the way she pronounces the opening lines "Oh the girls all dance with the boys from the city/and they don't care to dance with me" (00:08). Brackett's concepts of denaturalization and renaturalization (see page 66) spring to mind when hearing this. In one way, Welch' voice has a shy quality, apparent in how she ends this phrase with a weaker emphasis than she has held throughout the phrase so far, on the word "me" (00:16). Most of the time, however, she proudly flaunts country music performativity – the way words are renaturalized by the Southern accent and the pressed vocal technique. In addition to the effects of this performative accent, the working class identity of the main character is strengthened through clumsy use of words, such as rhymes like these: "Now Jordan's banks they're red and muddy/ And the rolling water is wide/ But I got no boat, so I'll be good and muddy/ when I get to the other side" (02:18). The words are on the whole simple and "renaturalized" in the same way as the vocals.

The sound of Welch's and Rawlings' voices blend. Welch's vocals are up front in the mix and sound very direct. Her singing style meets traditional country music's requirements of a down-to-earth and authentic-sounding voice. Interestingly, Rawling's voice sounds remarkably "feminine" in this song. This may however be a result of how Welch's and Rawling's voices blend so well that one cannot always hear that they are the voices of one woman and one man. Welch's voice is heard better than Rawlings' and there is no doubt that we hear a woman's voice, but Rawlings's voice is much more ambiguous.

Welch is a chronicler of a time that she did not experience, in other words, she is a chronicler of constructions of the past. The syntagmatic structure (Middleton: 1990:251) of "Red Clay Halo" is a straightforward lyrical structure: The style governs the form.

Conclusion

One could ask whether Welch's putting on of an old-fashioned feminine image a symptom of a post-modern entertainment industry in which female masks can be taken on and off without revealing anything about the woman behind the mask. Then again, the inauthenticity of

appearing as a self-styled early 20th century female country singer at the end of the 20th century can be a sign of authenticity in itself - because we experience that Welch is so obviously *playing* with this image, we get to grasp Welch's own *intention* behind her public and musical personae. It is most likely that the audience interpret Welch's musical and visual style as a demonstration of the love she has for this musical tradition – that she is so fond of it that she wishes to associate herself with it. In other words, this seems to be another example of how strong the ties are between music and identity. In some ways Welch points to the construction of gender by juxtaposing it with constructions of music history and with constructions of regional and national identity. Kirby (2006: 151) comments that Welch “is both a part of the tradition but In transforming herself into ‘country’ and ‘southern’ while maintaining critical distance on those terms, Gillian Welch enacts what performance studies scholar Ian Maxwell [...] terms ‘a kind of elective affinity: a process of identification revealing of the intensely mediated labor of making a culture of one’s own’.” One could perhaps say the same about her take on femininity. Many of Welch's performances do manage to downplay the relevance of the gender identity of the singer/musician. She does this largely through setting up contradictory relations between the songs' external and internal levels of communication. That is, by so clearly invoking music, themes and images that belong in a kind of mythical past, Welch openly acknowledges that also her gender identity is “taken on”.

While the very strategy of a shameless borrowing from/imitation of the past might be seen as postmodern in itself, Welch's performance involves much more homage than parody. Welch's voice is general in the same manner that her lyrics and music are general, that is, stylistic traits are emphasised over particular personality. Still, Welch does come across as having a distinct personal style, although this style is made up of influences from others

Welch's mixture of construction and autobiography begs questions in relation to representation of gender. The character Gillian Welch is just one of the many characters Welch portrays - she *does* portray herself rather than express herself, which is clear from how she follows the genre conventions of the folk song where the singer does not attempt to hide that she is telling a story, and where the song becomes about the account of the story rather than about the story in itself. The results of this are arguably that Welch, through limiting the amount of possible identifications, somewhat paradoxically achieves freedom: By opening up

a wide range of possible levels of identifications for herself inside the text, as the text's narrator, she is enabled to go wherever she likes to.

Chapter 5: Conclusion

When we examine the forms of femininity we find in music from the 1990s and 2000s, the question of tradition soon arises. We may for example ask why contemporary female artists still so often play traditionally feminine instruments like the piano and the acoustic guitar, as is the case with Amos and Welch respectively. According to Mavis Bayton (1997:37ff), women have been more active in pop and folk than in rock, they have been vocalists more often than instrumentalists, and when being instrumentalists, they have been prone to play the instruments which have been considered to be most feminine, such as keyboard instruments and the flute. As such, Gordon appears as one of the boys, Amos as conventionally feminine and Welch as authentically feminine. But we have also noted that playing the bass can in fact be considered feminine within certain contexts. Moreover, Amos, who plays “feminine” keyboard instruments, displays a “masculine” virtuosity. In short, the main thing may not in

fact which instruments the artists play, but *how* they play them. What Gordon, Amos and Welch have in common in terms of instrument technique is a great competence within their own style, and being in control of their instruments.

A significant aspect of how these artists perform femininity is how they form vocal expressions, as when we listen to music we tend “to associate the voice directly with the ‘closed positionings’ of the body when it comes to identifying notions of gender” (Hawkins: 2002:45). As we have seen, Gordon’s, Amos’s and Welch all use their voices in ways that invite several different interpretations. Such a multiplicity of meaning might in fact be said to be inherent in singing as such. All three artists sing in ways that acknowledge how femininity exists in form of different cultural identities. Gordon imitates “rock in general” in a husky voice that has the texture of an adult but the technique of a young rebel. Amos uses her voice to break out of the frames of the pop format, and she sets up a contrast between her little girl-voice and her intensely emotional and seductive femme fatale. Building her performance on those of both men and women from the country music tradition, Welch occupies a vocal space in which she is performatively free from gender restrictions.

Amos’s performances are much focused on the subject of femininity; a lot of her music is partly *about* reconciling the “good” and “bad” sides of the feminine. Operating within a punk-like ethos that is also infused with ideas from avant garde art, Gordon has in reality no less focus on gender than Amos, but her approach to gender identity is more stylised, more obviously and outspokenly self-conscious. Taking on roles is something Gordon does if not exactly detachedly, then at least with what seems to be a mixture of passion and demonstrative coolness. Welch’s role playing is contained within the country music tradition, and must be interpreted accordingly. However, her choice of styling herself as a traditionally feminine country artist is in itself a performance of gender identity, one that demonstrates how one’s gender identity always is tied up with other aspects of one’s identity – in this case an affiliation with a musical tradition.

Crucial for the possibility of identification with these artists from the audience side is their image in interviews, TV-appearances and biographies as laid-back, normal, friendly women that give the audience the experience that the artist is one of them, rather than being placed on a higher level of a hierarchical scale. This is something I have not touched much upon in the case studies, but it seems to be the case that these artists all signify an authenticity built upon

knowledge of the constructedness of the whole star system. In addition, Gordon, Amos and Welch are all composers, instrumentalists, and performers. As I wrote in the introduction, they are all women whose agency and creativity is evident. Therefore, they can all be seen as serving the cause of feminism, if not in other ways then as examples of women who have an agenda and who participate in discourses around femininity.

None of these artists attempt to “escape” from femininity by acting tomboyish or being one of the boys (see Reynolds and Press: 1995: 233). I can see how it can be argued that Kim Gordon in fact imitates male rock rebellion, but for me, her art-oriented and theoretically sophisticated approach to musical creation and expression makes her image and playing style particularly interesting in terms of questioning the premises of feminine performance. Gordon, Amos and Welch seem to be negotiating to create and recreate distinctly feminine subjectivities in a male-dominated culture. What makes it exiting to study them is that their identities or personae are self-reflexive – they do not assume to be given or natural, but always involve some kind of conflict.

Gordon, Amos and Welch all perform masculinity as well as femininity. As witnessed, a certain admiration of masculinity surfaces in all three artists, at times accompanied by the wish to be or fantasy of being a man. Gordon, who is surrounded by men, parodies the poses of male rock star, probably partly because she is envious and partly because she is repelled. Amos craves masculine power, but she never lets go of her femininity. Instead, she explores the darker side of feminine stereotypes in order to raise femininity to same level of power that masculinity seems to be at. The one who seems least troubled by the wish to be a man is Welch. She takes on the role of a female version of the rolling stone type, but she balances this image with the equally mythological role of “the good woman”. The wider implications of the “masculinity complex” might be problematic, yet most important knowledge to be drawn from this is that in music one has the power to inhabit all kinds of subject positions.

The artists relate to having a female body in different ways, somewhere in between “the desire to disappear and strategic exhibitionism” (Reynolds and Press: 1995:324). All three women stay within the boundaries of the conventionally attractive⁶². There is of course tremendous pressure on female popular musicians to look good, and by (mostly) adhering to

⁶² This is seen as a disadvantage by some female artists. “If women could learn to be as unattractive as men, it would go a long way towards demystifying females in bands” (Tanya Donnelly quoted in Eileraas: 1997:131).

the normative beauty standards of commercial culture, artists like Gordon, Amos and Welch remain within “safe” femininity. Thus, their play with feminine roles may turn out to be less challenging and disruptive than how they seem. Karina Eileraas (1997:135), however, allows for the possibility that female artists’ conventional prettiness does not necessarily mean that they support the commercial cult of beauty. Pretty women can question the concept of beauty “through scathing indictments of its enabling props, conditions, and effects, and ‘uglify’ their personas through their multifaceted performances”. In various ways, the artists in this thesis view female gender “neither [as] an essence nor a strategic series of persona, but a painful tension between the two” (Reynolds and Press: 1995:234), and for them “to be a woman is to be torn between the fact of biology and the fiction of femininity” (ibid.). In the last instant, then, Gordon, Amos and Welch all have a conventionally feminine appearance, but they do represent gender identity as constructed and problematic.

Adriana Cavarero (2005:173) suggests that vocal expression is in itself politically charged:

From the maternal scene onward, the voice manifests the *unique being* of each human being, and his or her spontaneous self-communication according to the rhythms of a sonorous relation. In this sense, the ontological horizon that is disclosed by the voice – or what we want to call a *vocal ontology of uniqueness* – stands in contrast to the various ontologies of fictitious entities that the philosophical tradition, over the course of its historical development, designates with names like ‘man’, ‘subject’, ‘individual’. For what these universal categories share is the neglect of the ‘uniqueness’ of those human beings (or to use the metaphysical lexicon, their ‘particularity’ and their ‘finitude’).

For Cavarero, the voice can never refer to just the culturally constructed, potentially apolitical subject. In effect of originating from a particular, unique body, the voice signals the individuality of a person. As such, Gordon, Amos and Welch all provide examples of how femininity as situation can never be limited to dominant images of women. As Beauvoir has claimed, what is interesting is the lived experience and the situation of a particular subject, of which sex and gender are but aspects – but of course significant aspects nevertheless. Gordon, Amos and Welch all “question [...] and expand [...] the roles available to women for self-expression (Eileraas: 1997:135), because music is a place in which subjects are granted a special agency. Although the three women in question remain within safe boundaries, they are examples of how gender identity is always open for negotiation. Gender norms can always be contested through the performance of and listening to music.

In the seventeenth century, what was regarded as masculine underwent significant changes; from now on men were encouraged to hide their emotions while women are encouraged/expected to be emotional (McClary: 2002:50). Today, it seems to be the case that female artists – particularly solo artists that are singers – are more often accused of being “too personal” or “too emotional” – to be self-obsessed and therefore uninteresting in their music - than do male artists. In her book *Interpreting the personal: Expression and the formation of feelings*, Sue Campbell (1997), inspired by Maurice Merleau-Ponty, argues that feelings do not pre-exist our action; they are formed in the acts of expression or concealment: “[E]xpression is the activity through which our psychological states, including our feelings, become individuated for both others and ourselves.” (Campbell: 1997:48f, original emphasis). Campbell goes against the traditional view that “feelings are individuated prior to their expression” (1997:49) and claims instead that our feelings are formed “through acts of expression” (1997:131), whereby we attempt to make significant what happens to us. When a person -interestingly most often a woman - is seen as ‘too emotional’, the accusation is based not on “the frequency or even intensity” of the expression of feeling but by its *mode* (1997: 54f) – that is, apparent acts like tears and outbursts. Music is an example of the aesthetic vocabulary that serves as a place where “the expression of feeling is given more rein, and the complex diversity and idiosyncrasy of feelings are acknowledged by critical practice” (Campbell: 1997:154). Within musical practice, by which I still mean both performing and listening, musicians and listeners can express, or found expressed, and thus make manifest, what Campbell calls *free-style feelings*, personally significant feelings that do not necessarily fall within the category of classic emotions. Gordon, Amos and Welch are politically potent because they communicate that (what we perceive as) their emotions are legitimate, that listeners may find affirmation that their emotions (whether or not these actually coincide with or resemble those of the musicians) are legitimate.

[B]oth sentimentality and emotionality are limiting expressive virtues of femininity. They police expression through the development or limitation of certain expressive resources that will, at the same time, allow for the dismissal of what is significant to women about our own lives when this significance is a violation of the constraints on gender performance: when we express ourselves, we must do so within the constraints of gender. The pervasiveness of these criticisms of women’s affective lives suggest strongly that women are constrained to express gender roles when they express feeling (Campbell: 1997:180).

There is an interesting parallel between what Beauvoir does in *The Second Sex* and the impression I have of the performances of Gordon, Amos and Welch, taken together, after having studied them. Let me explain: Linda Zerilli thinks the strength of Beauvoir’s approach

lies in how she presents "a barrage of competing facts, views, and voices" so that "[b]y the end of *The Second Sex*, the reader has not the slightest idea of what a woman is" (quoted in Atack :1998:57n20). Having examined the femininities performed by Gordon, Amos and Welch, I have no idea what "femininity" is. But this is the whole point of why I considered the performance of gender in music important in the first place; because musical performance acknowledges that femininity never can be pinned down. There are no answers to what femininity is, because women are always ambiguous (Beauvoir: 1997:287). Rather, femininity is a process, and I hope to have given a glimpse into the processes by which femininity is performed by popular music artists.

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Appendix

Lyrics

SONIC YOUTH: QUEST FOR THE CUP

YR THE THRILL OF A MILLION
WALKING DOWN THE SIDEWALK
FEEL LIKE AN ALARM CLOCK
WOKE UP AND DRESSED UP
DON'T LOOK LIKE A T-SHIRT
I FEEL JUST LIKE A DONUT
COME AND TAKE THE TRASH OUT
WHAT'S THE USE OF CRYING
DON'T LOOK LIKE A BUMMER
FEEL JUST LIKE A BURGER
CAN I MAKE HIM LIKE ME
DO YOU FEEL LIKE I DO
DON'T LOOK LIKE A SLIP SKIRT
I FEEL JUST LIKE A POSER
I DON'T LOOK LIKE AN ANGEL
I GUESS I'LL PUT SOME JEANS ON
MAKE MY LIPS LOOK REDDER
TRUE YOU STILL LOOK BETTER

THIS IS FOR LISA

RAN AWAY TO THE WEST
FAXED MY MOM FOR THE TEST
COULDN'T STAY FOR THE REST
THEN I MET HIM JESS
HE IS JUST THE BEST
WE KISSED RIGHT UNDER A TREE
I FELT SO SALTY FREE
I FELT SO SALTY FREE
I FELT NOTHING LIKE ME

I FELT SO S-A-LTY FREE

ALL YOUR DREAMS WILL COME TRUE, ALL MY DREAMS CAME TRUE
BUT NOW, I HAVE A BUNCH OF OTHER DREAMS, TA-DUM-DUM
IT'S GOTTA BE HOT HOT

I FELT SO S-A-LTY FREE

-

Tori Amos: Professional Widow

Slag pit stag shit
Honey bring it close to my lips (yes)
Don't blow those brains yet
We've got to be big boy
It's got to be big

Starfucker just like my daddy
Starfucker just like my daddy

Selling his baby
Selling his baby

Gonna strike a deal
make him feel like a congressman
It's running in the family
It runs in the family

Rest your shoulders
Peaches and cream
Everywhere a Judas
As far as you can see
Beautiful angel calling
"we've got every rerun of Muhammad Ali"

Prism perfect
Honey bring it close to my lips yes
What is termed a landslide
Of principal proportion boy
It's gotta be big boy
It better be big yes

Starfucker just like my daddy
Starfucker just like my daddy
Selling his baby
Just like my daddy
Selling his baby

Gonna strike a deal
Make him feel like a congressman
It's running in the family
It runs in the family

Mother Mary china white
Brown may be sweeter she will supply
(love, peace, love, give me peace, love and a hard cock)

Gillian Welch: Red Clay Halo

All the girls all dance with the boys from the city,
And they don't care to dance with me.
Now it ain't my fault that the fields are muddy,
And the red clay stains my feet.

And it's under my nails and it's under my collar,
And it shows on my Sunday clothes.
Though I do my best with the soap and the water,
But the damned old dirt won't go.

But when I pass through the pearly gate,
Will my gown be gold instead?
Or just a red clay robe with red clay wings,
And a red clay halo for my head?

Now it's mud in the spring and it's dust in the summer,
When it blows in a crimson tide.
Until trees and leaves and the cows are the colour,
Of the dirt on the mountainside.

But when I pass through the pearly gate,
Will my gown be gold instead?
Or just a red clay robe with red clay wings,
And a red clay halo for my head?

Now Jordan's banks they're red and muddy,
And the rolling water is wide.
But I got no boat, so I'll be good and muddy,
When I get to the other side.

And when I pass through the pearly gate,
Will my gown be gold instead?
Or just a red clay robe with red clay wings,
And a red clay halo for my head?

I'll take the red clay robe with the red clay wings,
And a red clay halo for my head.